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SUPER FLY

A novelization based on the original screenplay by

Philip Fenty

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I

Don't let anybody tell you—ever—that it's the same sun that shines on Park Avenue and Harlem alike. No way. Old Mister sun may smile on the rich-bitch penthouses that look down over Park, but he sure as hell wears a frown when he gets further uptown. There, around 125th Street, even the weakest rays of the winter sun light up the filth and the shabbiness of the streets without warmth or mercy. The bright colors of the stores and their cheap merchandise, the overflowing garbage in the seldom-emptied bins, the grimy doorways with their nodding occupants huddled, the rats and the roaches—all are touched by the sun without gentleness; poverty seems to shrink away from the light.

Joyboy Johnson stood on the corner of 125th and Lenox, strung out, his eyes slitted against the feeble rays of the early December sun, his

head aching from the light. He felt no warmth from the sunlight, no warmth from his green imitation-furlined snorkel jacket or the knitted cap pulled down low over his forehead and ears. Joyboy was cold to the bone—the bones where his jones lay deep—the hopeless cold of the junkie who can never get warm. He shivered, dancing from foot to foot as the crowds of people—black and Spanish—pushed past him on this busy afternoon. His stomach ached, and he couldn't control the shakes that took possession of his meager body. Joyboy needed a fix, and he needed it bad. He craned his head around at the crowds, searching for somebody, and he almost smiled with relief as he spotted the small, skinny form he was looking for.

Willy came up fast, looking neither to the right or to the left. As he reached Joyboy, he tapped his arm without a word and they began walking downtown together, two thin pairs of shoulders hunched against the wind, four brown fists sunk deep into jacket pockets, seeking comfort that wasn't there.

Joyboy's voice cracked a little as he spoke: "I made the connection. You get the money?"

His companion didn't answer. Instead, ducking his head lower, he began to walk even faster.

Joyboy tugged at Willy's sleeve and his voice took on a frantic note.

"You hear me, nigger?"

"I ain't got it. She wouldn't give me nothin'."

Joyboy stopped in his tracks, stricken. Tightening his hold on Willy's sleeve, he whirled the smaller boy around to face him. His words were practically a wail of pain and rage.

"I told you she wouldn't do it! We done wasted all this time."

They walked blindly together, ignoring the masses of people who surged over the avenue, giving it a color and humanity found only in the poorer neighborhoods of the world. Heavy women wearing head scarves and toting full shopping bags; young bloods in fly threads and pointy-toe shoes with high heels; lovely, lithe young black girls wearing Angela afros and microskirts despite the chill winds, their long brown legs smart in high boots; kids ducking in and out of the crowds in busy, private games of their own, darting nimbly into traffic and out again. Neither Willy nor Joyboy was aware of anybody else on the street, only of their own need, their own desperate need to shoot up and stop the pain. Joyboy's mouth tightened in a determined grimace.

"Now we gonna do it *my* way!" he exclaimed.

And he outlined his plan to Willy as they walked.

The same old sun that frowns on Harlem smiles like a whore on Park Avenue. On this lazy afternoon it crept lovingly through the almost-closed slats of the immaculate louvred shutters and into the large apartment. The winter rays licked the polished wood of the expensive old furniture, making the polished surfaces gleam. Tracing the textures of the precious objects of glass and china that stood around the room, caressing the contours of the bed covers, the furs, silks and velvets that trailed carelessly onto the carpeted floor. The sun outlined the warm curves and valleys of the sleeping girl; her naked skin gleamed like a lily as the rays touched her round buttocks and warmed the nipple of an exposed breast. She lay sprawled over the rumpled Porthault sheets, her cloud of long dark hair, touched with chestnut, obscuring her face. Her body was that of a very young, very pampered, very satisfied woman.

The sun gleamed momentarily on metal. An ankh, the tau cross of ancient Egypt, fashioned of platinum, hanging from a platinum chain, rested on the chest of the naked man beside her. He was awake, although in repose, his muscular arms clasped behind his head, his large dark eyes

open wide, clouded by thought. He was a handsome, powerfully built black man in his late 20s. His body and face were lean, but his shoulders were huge and his arms and thighs powerfully developed. His skin was the color of good coffee mixed with the heaviest cream, his nose thin and high-bridged above the thick mustache, his lips full. From his high brow, over his well-shaped head, silky black hair fell over long sideburns straight to this shoulders. Although he was good looking enough to stop a woman's breath when she set eyes on him, there was something in his face—a wariness, like that of a jungle animal, a hooded quality to the eyes—that made men think twice about risking their ass for their women.

The man sighed slightly, breaking his own after-sex reverie. He reached behind him to the inlaid headboard of the large bed, his hands finding a small, curiously-worked antique snuff box. He removed the lid, and lifted the ankh from his chest. At the other end of the cross was a tiny spoon, fashioned especially for cocaine. Dipping the spoon deftly into the box, the man scooped up some white powder and neatly sniffed it up, first into one nostril, then into the second. He smiled slightly as he felt the familiar rush. Better

than a cigarette! He turned to the now-rousing girl beside him.

"You wanna blow?"

The girl opened one green eye, and considered the question.

"Are you going to leave?"

"Yeah, I gotta make a pickup."

The girl brushed her cloud of dark hair from her beautiful face with a slim, white arm.

"Then I don't want any."

Priest looked over at Cynthia without a word, but his dark face held a silent "why?"

Cynthia shrugged unblemished shoulders. "Some things go better with coke." The meaning of her bad joke was unmistakable, but Priest had business to tend to before more pleasure. He swung his long, muscular legs over the side of the bed, groped around the floor until he found his briefs, then stood. As he dressed, he felt the girl's eyes on his body, drinking in his masculinity. He put on his clothes without haste, letting her dig him.

"Will I see you soon?" It was the question they always asked. Priest didn't bother to reply.

"Will you be back soon?" Her voice became louder and held an anxious note. "Are you coming back *soon*?" It was almost a shriek, carrying across the apartment and curling around Priest's

shoulders as he closed the heavy door behind him.

The uniformed doorman of the expensive Park Avenue building in which Cynthia lived didn't dare make a remark as Priest strode out the front door and under the canopy. He just looked daggers at the back of the man whose long legs carried him across the street to where a customized Eldorado convertible stood long and low and waiting at the curb. The doorman had never in his life seen as much money at once as it took to put those clothes on the black man's back—the broadtail fur maxi-coat trimmed with leather over the white-stitched black knitted suit, the wide brimmed two hundred dollar fedora and the classy boots.

"Pimp," he muttered under his breath as he watched the tall, dark man unlock the door of the wicked-looking black automobile. But he was wrong. Priest was no pimp. He was a dealer, a high-class dealer of the best cocaine in the city, the pusher-man of the nose candy. Not a street dealer; he had lieutenants for that action. Priest himself handled only the richest clientele, those who had the bread to score weight. And in Harlem, that's high society, class all the way.

Priest slid easily behind the wheel, thrilling again to the powerful response of the wheel, as

the power steering glided him easily out of the tight parking spot. He never got tired of driving this baby, never tired of remembering that she was his, all his, paid for with cash money. Except for the eager hands who washed and polished her, nobody was allowed to touch this black beauty but him, Priest. Her leather and chrome, her gleaming dash and comfortable bucket seats, the custom details like the twin powerful stereo speakers front and back. He slipped a tape into the tapedeck under the dash and smiled as Laura Nyro began to moan. Her voice filled the car as it sped north up Park Avenue, north to Harlem where the action is. "Getting off . . . on sweet cocaine," sang Laura and Priest grinned and nodded his head, getting behind the music with a mellow feeling.

Outside the car windows Park Avenue gleamed like a string of jewels, the annual Christmas trees ablaze on every block from the Pan Am building on up to the fringes of the ghetto. The white light of the short winter day was filtered by the tinted windshield of the Eldorado, giving the world outside an almost summery glow of pale green that softened it.

Soon the classy high-rise, high-rent buildings of Park gave way to the tenements above 96th Street, the beginnings of the black world, the

third world, a mingling of hope and hopelessness, of life and life-in-death, of noise and color and poverty and slums, of music and rats, junk and vermin. The long black car slid easily down the side streets of Harlem, past crowded tenements and the racket of latin and soul music coming from the ubiquitous record stores. In front of a numberless, nameless tenement, indistinguishable from its neighbors the Eldorado pulled up and doubled-parked.

Inside the freezing tenement hallway, lit only by a 25-watt bulb, Joyboy and Willy lurked nervously, greasy and hurting, with their teeth chattering a combination of cold and fear. Yet sweat was pouring from both of them freely; Joyboy shook his head to dash the perspiration out of his eyes. Willy clutched a nine-inch length of lead pipe in his gloved hand, but the hand was trembling uncontrollably. Both boys were desperate enough to kill for a fix.

"Are you with me or not?" Joyboy's voice was frantically insistent.

"Yeah . . . Yeah!" It was all Willy could manage between shakes.

"Now this is it. The next mother fucker comes through that door we gonna take 'em off . . . all right?"

Before Willy could choke out a reply, the

tenement door opened and Priest strode in. Willy moved instinctively, dashing forward to catch Priest hard on the side of the head with the lead pipe before the tall man could react to what was happening.

Priest fell backwards, crashing into the crumbling wall and falling heavily to the floor, unconscious. He lay unmoving. After a beat, the two junkies threw themselves on him and began rifling his pockets. From his coat pocket Joyboy extracted a huge wad of bills, and gasped in astonishment. This was more money than either had seen in their lives, thousands of dollars, Priest's pickup money. Instead of running, the amazed boys began to count the bread. Priest stirred, slowly regaining consciousness. Alarmed, Willy stood up and slammed Priest again with the pipe. But it was a badly-placed blow and had the reverse effect. Instead of knocking Priest out, it roused him, causing the tall man enough pain to bring him back to full consciousness. He struggled up onto one knee.

Willy, seeing what was happening, swung hard at Priest again. But this time Priest was ready. Blocking the blow with his strong left arm, he swung hard with his right fist, catching Willy in the gut. The boy's face twisted with the pain and he dropped the pipe. Falling to his knees, Willy

began to cry in great, retching sobs. Joyboy hurriedly crammed Priest's money into his pocket and dashed from the tenement out into the street as the tall man rose groggily to his feet.

Joyboy ran for his life, not daring to look over his shoulder. He could hear Priest's boots pounding on the sidewalk behind him, and fear pumped fresh adrenalin through the boy's veins, giving him a new spurt of energy. He zigzagged across the street, oblivious to the angry traffic and hooting horns, and made it to the sidewalk. He cast a quick, frantic look back, only to see Priest gaining on him and almost on top of him. Joyboy made tracks for the nearest building entrance. Running straight through the brownstone and out the back door, he sped across two vacant lots, strewn with garbage and the corpses of dead rats, with an occasional mortifying cat or two. Behind him he could hear Priest coming on strong, knocking over garbage cans to block the boy's escape should he double back.

Joyboy cleared the corner and dashed into an empty lot, only to realize his mistake. Behind him the escape route was blocked by Priest; a high wire fence cut off two sides of the lot and a tenement building lined the fourth side of the square. He made a half-hearted attempt at the wire fence, but veered off when he realized it was twelve feet

high. His heart in his mouth, his lungs aching for breath, he rushed at the tenement. He made a leap for the fire-escape ladder, his scared fingers scrabbling frantically, and brought it down. Scrambling up the metal stairs to the first landing, Joyboy turned and looked down. For a split second his frightened eyes and Priest's furious ones met and locked. Then Priest started up the fire escape, taking the steps two at a time. Joyboy, in desperation, broke the glass of the window on the landing and sprang through into the room. On the instant, Priest had followed him. He knocked the terrified boy to the floor and kicked at him savagely.

The room was worse than shabby and freezing cold. A few mattresses were set directly on the floor, near a flaming sterno can that served the room as a miserable and ineffective stove. A sad-eyed black woman lay huddled fully clothed under a few ragged blankets. Around her body, cuddled close for warmth, were five children of varying ages. All were dressed in patched coats, mittens or gloves and shoes, wearing everything they owned in an attempt to survive the cold. When Priest leapt through the window after Joyboy, the children uttered squeaks of terror and drew closer to their mother, who grabbed them and pulled them with her into a corner.

Priest spared them barely a glance, nor did he notice the dishes piled in the sink or the garbage piled in the corner. All his attention was turned on Joyboy, who lay puking and sobbing on the floor, limp and collapsed. As the pathetic junkie shook madly with fear, Priest bent down and reached into his pocket. Recovering his money, he stood erect and aimed another kick at the boy, who was spewing his guts out all over the already-filthy floor. He stuffed the wad of bills into his pocket and turned to the woman and her crying, frightened children. He met an unswerving stare of hatred and contempt, the glare of a woman who would rather endure poverty with pride than make money as Priest did.

Joyboy had passed out. Priest turned his back on the woman and, stepping over the boy's body, unlocked the door and left the wretched flat without a word.

II

Georgia's apartment was in a neighborhood. Not a ghetto, not a sterile section of town like Cynthia's Park Avenue, but a real neighborhood where real people lived and shopped and loved and raised babies. Near Central Park West in the Eighties, it was a warm, large, tastefully-decorated and comfortable apartment that bordered on luxury. It was a lot like Georgia herself, and Priest headed there automatically. He parked the Eldorado in a No-Parking zone near Georgia's brownstone and headed up the front stairs, using his key to unlock the hall door.

The blood drained from Georgia's cheeks as she saw Priest's cut and bleeding face, and her warm brown complexion turned grayish.

"What happened?" She tried to keep her voice calm; she had to fight for control but she won the fight. She rushed to Priest and examined the

cut over his eye; it was bleeding heavily where the pipe had bitten deep.

"Couple junkies tried to rob me."

"Sit down." Unhappiness and pity played over Georgia's lovely features, mixed with worry and irritation. She left the room, and Priest could hear her running water and opening cabinets. He pulled off his jacket, tugged at his turtleneck collar and sat down on the wide, comfortable bed. In a moment, Georgia was back, carrying bandages and a wet towel, and Priest eyed her face and body appreciatively. She was a beauty, his Georgia, all soft warm curves, long, slender legs and smooth brown skin. Her face was a study in beautiful anxiety as she started to work on his forehead, washing the blood off and cleaning and inspecting the wound. She bandaged it quickly and expertly, her fingers touching him so lightly as to cause him almost no pain. Georgia always knew what she was doing.

He strolled over to the mirror to inspect his bandage. Behind him, he heard Georgia's voice, low and a little muffled.

"Priest, you got to stop this."

"Stop what?"

Georgia turned to face her lover, her face clouding. She was fighting back tears, and there was anger in her husky voice.

"The way you live, damn it!"

"I told you, what happened had nothin' to do with my business. Just a couple of junkies tryin' to get off. Could've happened to anybody." His voice was calm and reasonable without a hint of rancor in it. If there were risks to this dealing business, they were big risks, not little flea-bites like junkie muggers.

Georgia bent gracefully and began to clean up the discarded, bloody gauze.

"When I finish here I'll drive you to the doctor."

Priest waved a hand in a negative gesture.

"I got some people meetin' me here, should be any time now. I feel all right. I'll see him tomorrow."

Georgia straightened and turned to glare angrily at Priest. Before she could say anything, the doorbell rang, startling them both. She slammed the wet towel she was holding onto the bed and started for the door.

"I'll get the door, Georgia." Priest's voice was firm.

The bell rang again. Georgia turned on her heel and left the room angrily, but with grace and style. She had class. Priest strolled through the bedroom and into the large, bright livingroom. He unlocked the front door of the apartment and

let two men in. One was tall, young, handsome, sharply dressed in fly clothes and gold rings. The other, older man was short and heavy, bald, his face a comical mask of a born joker. They followed Priest into the flat, and stood laughing and jiving for a minute or two. The fat man sat down on the couch; the two younger men stood slightly apart from him, still talking. The sharp dude was Judd, Priest's trusted lieutenant. It was Judd who had the direct dealings with the street people, the small-time dealers who spread Priest's product around. His was the authority second only to Priest's; he stood tall and badass and the women flocked to him. His people moved the coke, leaving Priest only the highest-level dealing and connecting.

Priest took a joint wrapped in straw papers from a stash on the coffee table and rolled it through his lips to wet it down. As he started to light it, Judd's dark hand appeared under his nose, holding an unfolded fifty dollar bill filled with coke.

"Try some of this cocaine."

Priest laughed. "Never say no. Don't drop it."

"No way." The dark-skinned man laughed back. Priest lifted the coke spoon off his chest, ducked his head and took a hit, feeling the immediate rush of good coke. He blew again

through his other nostril and felt his head get mellow. Judd dipped into the fifty and hit twice on his own head. They grinned at each other as they felt the high, slapped each other's palms softly with a friendly five.

"Fat Freddy." Judd's nod indicated the fat man on the sofa. Priest glanced in his direction. Freddy sat, as round and as black as a lump of coal. As he caught Priest's eye, he twinkled and grinned at the boss, but there was an air of anxiety under the puppydog friendliness. All business now, Priest turned back to Judd.

"What's wrong with the fat man?"

"Dude ain't got your money. Said he was up in Remey's after-hours joint when it got busted and had to drop what he was carryin'." Both men spoke in low tones so the third man could not overhear.

"Well?" Priest's voice was cold. "You believe that?"

"I believe the nigger's lyin'. 'Cause he's been stretched out . . . and that bitch of his is all over him . . . like he's come into some money or something."

Priest made a heroic effort to control his anger, but the jaw muscles of his handsome face leapt and his eyes grew cold below the silky brows.

"That's his ass."

"Don't, Priest," the lieutenant pleaded. "He's good for it . . . bitch of his is the problem."

Now Priest gave vent to his anger, furious. Everywhere he looked he was being ripped off! First by some cruddy junkies and now by one of his own men! His words burst out loud, cold and loud.

"I got fifty men on the street! If they all get bitch trouble, I starve! Is that it? Is that what you tryin' to tell me, man?" His massive fists clenched in rage.

Overhearing him, Freddy grew very frightened. His eyes darted to the door as if searching for a quick exit, and drops of cold sweat appeared on his plump, unlined face. He pressed his hands together nervously, unable to meet Priest's cold, angry eyes.

Judd, too, grew jittery. Immediately, he dropped his defense of the fat man, and put up a placating hand.

"You do what you want to do, Priest."

"I want his ass out workin'." Priest hissed the words between clenched teeth.

Freddy rose and waddled clumsily over to the tall dealer, thoroughly freaked out.

"Ah, c'mon, man," he wheedled, "you know me. I'll get your money."

Priest bent his ice-cold stare on the shorter man.

"When?" he snapped. "This ain't the first time for you, trick. I've had to wait on you for as long as a month for my money. You been takin' advantage of me. This time you go to work." There was no mistaking the meaning of those words.

The verdict shattered Freddy. His face curled up in mental anguish, a grotesque comic mask, and he began to plead.

"But I can't, man! Violence ain't my thing. I just deal a little, that's all . . ."

Priest cut him off sharply. "Listen at the nigger," he snarled with a harsh laugh. "Don't argue, I'm givin' you a chance. You don't get my money *tonight* . . . I'm gonna put that young girl of yours out on Whore's Row and let her earn my money on her back."

Freddy's face twisted into even tighter pain at the threat, but there was a hint of anger, too.

"Hey, man, that's my wife you talkin' about."

"So what!" Priest was letting it all hang out. "I ain't lyin', man, I'll do it. You shouldn't have fucked with my money. Now I'm tryin' to give you a chance."

Freddy recognized that it was hopeless. Giving in, he sighed and his face deflated, smoothed out

into its usual plump contours and placid expression. He bowed his head in submission.

"I'll get the bread."

Priest nodded, his anger fading, all business now. He walked across the room to a tall chest of drawers. Pulling open the top drawer, he looked inside. An armory of guns, five or six in different sizes and makes, lay there. After a beat, he reached in and pulled one out. He crossed back to Judd, handing him the gun. He didn't bother to look at Freddy.

"Take him out on that thing we talked about in Jersey. Here, it's not marked; if anything happens, dump it."

The two men turned to go, Freddy still with shoulders bowed, Judd holding hard to the cool gun. Priest called out after them.

"Meet me at Scatter's tonight . . ."

"We'll make it." Judd's voice held confidence.

Priest stood for a minute lost in thought after the men had gone. He put a joint to his lips and lit it, taking a deep toke. But reefer wasn't what he wanted. He snuffed the j out; then, pulling his fur coat on decisively, he left the apartment.

Across the street, Freddy and Judd were climbing into a Corvair parked directly behind the Eldorado. Priest could see their heads together in earnest rapping. He chuckled as he

could imagine the beads of sweat rolling down the fat man's comical face; he could see Freddy flinching and twitching. The sporty little Corvair pulled away from the curb and as it roared past Priest he saw the gun change hands, Judd pressing it into the reluctant fingers of Fat Freddy. Satisfied, Priest strolled over to his customized wheel, slid into the sleek driver's seat and drove off in search of Eddy.

III

From the street it was just another warehouse or loft building, dark and deserted. It had no number on the door or any other sign to distinguish it from dozens of others like it in this dingy industrial section of Harlem. Surrounded by vacant lots, it brooded dim and lifeless in the night. But Priest had checked out the Caddys, Buicks, Chryslers parked a block away and knew that the action would be here tonight.

He let himself in downstairs and, ignoring the freight elevator, climbed up a winding, rusty iron staircase lit only by a single bare bulb at the top. When he reached the third storey, he was stopped by a huge steel door. He rapped three times on the plating, and a small judas window in the center of the door snapped open. Priest placed himself squarely where he could be seen, and a moment later the heavy door slid back. Priest ducked

in, giving skin to the young blood at the door, a spaced-out cat in dark glasses, dashiki and huge afro.

The room was decorated with posters of Angela, Jimi and Malcolm, wreathed heavily by the smoke from the cigarettes, cigars and reefers being smoked below. Somewhere there was a jukebox, and Nina was moanin' low. A bar ran along one side of the room, and here Priest stopped and bought himself a beer. In the center of the large loft room, a dozen or so men hung crowded around a large crap table covered in green cloth. Excitement ran high as the gamblers traded bets with each other, waving fists crammed with large bills, slapping each other's shoulders and laughing. The sweet smell of grass made Priest's nostrils twitch in appreciation; he could see a number of the men doing coke, too, snorting it with gusto, their laughter becoming louder and their gestures more expansive.

In the knot of men around the table, Priest spotted Eddy, flushed and laughing. Eddy was up, way up, high and flying on smoke and money. He was in the box. In one hand he held the pair of dice cupped lovingly, in the other a large sheaf of twenties and fifties. He was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes glittering brightly behind his blue-tinted shades, his skinny shoulders

shaking with glee. Next to him, a hulking, burly black was scowling. Evidently it was his bread that Eddy was now clutching so happily. He nudged Eddy impatiently.

"Shoot up, Eddy, you ain't gonna six."

"What do you mean I can't six?" Eddy was jubilant, confident in his luck. He laughed and shook the dice close to his ear, delighted by the rattle of the bones. "These two sisters do what I want. I'm the dude they out here workin' for." He laughed again.

His laughter annoyed his burly opponent even more. "C'mon, nigger, shoot the damn dice."

Eddy shot, the dice leaving his long, slim black fingers and dancing onto the table, bouncing off the backboard and coming to rest on the cloth. Four and two. Six, Eddy's point. He grinned even wider.

His opponent was incredulous, furious. "Look at this shit, *God damn*! Let me see them dice, you black mother. . . !"

With an agreeable nod, Eddy handed over the dice. The hulking man looked them over carefully, feeling with the tips of his sensitive fingers to detect any extra weight or irregularity. They were clean. With an angry snort, he threw them down on the table again.

Eddy laughed. In a jubilant, teasing voice he

reminded, "You seen the dice, now let me see my money."

Glaring, his opponent threw about $500 onto the table. Eddy scooped the bread up with a chuckle and started to count it.

"Hey, man, this looks like rent money to me." This got a big laugh from everybody crowding around the table, everybody, that is, except the dude whose money Eddy had won.

"I'll be lookin' at your momma's rent money before we through," he growled.

Eddy just laughed. "You wanta double up, my man?"

"That's a bet, dude. Shoot the damn dice."

"All bets down," called the houseman. "I'm lettin' him out!" He nodded to Eddy, who snapped his wrist and shot the dice out again for a winning seven. With an elated whoop, Eddy reached down and scooped up the money, peeling off three hundred for the houseman. As he counted it, his eye fell on Priest, who had been standing quietly watching the action. The smile faded from Eddy's face and, stashing the money in his pocket, he walked slowly over to Priest.

"What's the matter?"

"Everything's cool." Priest kept his manner casual.

"C'mon, man, if you up here, you up here lookin' for me." Eddy knew Priest well.

Priest acknowledged the truth of the observation with a smile.

"How much longer you gonna be? There *is* somethin' I wanna talk about."

At that moment the huge black man who'd been the big loser came up to the two friends, irritated and impatient.

"Don't freeze the dice, nigger! What you gonna do?"

Eddy turned back to Priest with a conciliating smile.

"Don't pull me away from here now. This dude got a hellified bankroll and he givin' me all the double up I want. That's what I came here for." He laughed and held his hand out to Priest, who slapped it with five and laughed along with his friend. Eddy stepped back up to the crap table, laying down his side bets. He made a large bet with the big man and rolled the bones. His point was eight. Eighter from Decatur. Make an eight, you graduate. He rolled again.

Priest set his beer down on the bar and headed for the door. Eddy caught sight of him, and a look of concern came over his youthful face. He called after his friend.

"Hey, Priest, wait up. I'm comin'."

Priest caught the signal, smiled and strolled back to the gaming table. Turning his attention for a last moment to the game, Eddy shook the dice, threw again and made his eight. With a shriek of jubilation, Eddy started to rake the money in with both hands, making his apologies to the other gamblers.

"Dig it, I gotta go talk to my man. Give you cats a chance to get straight later on tonight."

But this didn't set at all right with the heavy loser. He whirled and glared at the two buddies, his words directed at Eddy but his angry eyes staring at Priest.

"What's this shit? Hey, man, who is this cat? He come in here, tap you on the shoulder and my money walk right out the door."

Another player raised his objections to the hassle. "Hey, man, take that shit on outside! We here to gamble!"

The big man's mean temper deepened, and he turned his rage on the company in general.

"Fuck you! What's so important he got to leave now?" He took an enraged step toward Priest as several of the other players tried unsuccessfully to restrain him. With his muscular legs wide apart and his huge hands clenched into

heavy fists, he confronted Priest directly, scowling.

"Dig it, I lost a lot of money and I want an answer!"

Priest kept his cool. With a slight shrug of his broad shoulders, he replied laconically, "We got business."

"What business?" the big dude snarled. By now he had worked himself into one mother of a rage. "Answer me," he screamed at Priest. "You white lookin' . . ."

As those last words left his lips Priest had slapped him hard across the mouth, sending the big man spinning. The whole room froze; the tension could be cut with a switchblade. The large cat regained his footing and swelled with anger; he stared at Priest in disbelief and his rage grew until he seemed about ready to explode. Nobody uttered a sound, everyone waiting with drawn breath for the mayhem to start happening.

Quietly, unobtrusively, Eddy slipped his hand inside his coat. His jovial grin was gone now, his expression icy-cold and deadly. His long thin fingers curled around the grip of the pistol, holding it ready. The big man caught the movement out of the corner of his eye—as Eddy had intended him to—and turned his attention away from Priest for a beat. A long look at Eddy, who

raised his chin in silence and returned the stare, and the big man knew he wasn't kidding. His stare broke, he cast his eyes down and took a tentative step backward. At this, the room broke into a hubbub of relieved chatter, as the gamblers tried to resume the game in an effort to cool out.

"Hey, man, lessee some shootin'."

"I thought we all come here to gamble."

"Where are those fuckin' dice, man? My luck is *hot*!"

"Give me a shooter in the box," called out the houseman. "Let's get it on!"

The game started up again, the players crowding around the table. Only the large, angry dude stayed apart from the action, still staring at Priest and Eddy. His blood-filled eyes saw two flash cats, one tall and muscular, one lightly-built but fast, both dressed in skin-fitting and very expensive leather. They moved easily together, partners and friends, each ready to back the other up in anything. Priest returned his stare, then broke into an easy smile, turned and walked brazenly away, his back turned. Eddy kept his gaze firmly on the huge man and didn't make a move to leave until he saw him turn and go on back to the crap table. Then and only then did Eddy follow Priest out of the room.

Eddy caught up with Priest at the bar. Both

slipped their coats on, fancy men's furs that reached to the ankles and kept out the cold winds. For the first time, Eddy showed his annoyance.

"Nickel and dime nigger. If he couldn't afford to gamble he shouldn't of brought his black ass up here." As they headed down the stairs to the street, Eddy noticed Priest's bandage for the first time.

"What happened to your eye, man?"

"Couple a junkies tried to rip me off."

"Where?"

"I was makin' a pickup on 132nd."

They reached Priest's Eldorado, and Priest dug out the keys; they were attached to a gold ring from Tiffany. As he unlocked the car door, Priest noticed Eddy studying him with concern, his gaze narrowed through the blue-glass spectacles.

"Sure it wasn't somebody layin' for you?"

"Junkies, man." Priest's tone was reassuring. "It happens up here a hundred times a day. My number come up."

Eddy slid into the front seat, still a bit antsy. Why had Priest come all the way up to hellangone to get him out of a crap game? Something must be eating the dude, and Priest was not a cat to be lightly ruffled. Whatever it was, it must be

heavy. Well, no use hassling his head about it; Priest would fill him in in his own sweet time.

Priest said nothing on the drive downtown. Lost in thought, he kept his intelligent dark eyes on the road ahead, his lean face serious. They drove through the quiet December night down Fifth Avenue, barely noticing as the tenements of the ghetto changed to the million-dollar co-operative apartments of the rich white world. The automobile was filled with music, another of Priest's favorites. The Grateful Dead were riding that train, high on cocaine . . . 'ole Casey Jones. Trouble ahead, trouble behind. The lyrics suited Priest's mood, and he rode with them.

When they reached 90th Street the custom-built Eldorado swung east, moving lightly through the brand-new high-rise apartment buildings. At Second Avenue they turned the corner and slid into 89th Street, into the private garage of one of the classiest buildings on the block. As the two men stepped out of the convertible, a white atendant in a mechanic's jumpsuit, with "Bud" embroidered on the pocket, ran up as frisky and friendly as a pup dog. At the rate at which Eddy and Priest had been tipping him, he should have wagged his tail.

The garage was filled with superfly wheels,

most of them foreign. Bentleys parked next to Mercedes, Ferraris sat nose to tail with Caddys, Chryslers and Lincolns. There was even a Maserati, a long low model that might have come off a Gran Prix course. Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of metal, leather and rubber in that one garage, Priest and Eddy walking among them with reverence, stopping once or twice to admire and once even to pat a particularly tasty number, a Ghibli. As the attendant whisked the Eldorado up the ramp and out of sight, the two men reached the tenant elevator. Eddy pressed the 24th floor; the doors closed silently, and the elevator car sped upward.

The upstairs hallway was stark, modern, even depressingly so, with none of the burnished age of Park Avenue, none of the charm. All was function and sterility, but it still smelled and looked expensive. Priest pulled out the Tiffany key ring and opened the apartment door.

Inside, the pad really took your eye. What it cost per month could feed a family of eight for a year—even in Harlem, where food cost more. The living room swept down thirty feet and turned into a large "L" shape that accommodated dining. At the end of the room, a glass wall presented a breathtaking view of the East River. On a clear night you could even see the lights of

planes taking off at La Guardia. The glass wall was actually a pair of sliding doors that opened onto a terrace. The kitchen was placed to the right of the livingroom and the hallway at the left led to two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Two bathrooms! Not bad for a couple of badass dudes whose families used to share a leaky toilet in the hall with six other families!

The furniture was sparse, but masculine, and mostly reflected Priest's expensive tastes. Dominated by a huge pair of couches, the living room featured a 24-inch color TV, placed so that it could be seen from every part of the room. A tall glass and chrome etagere held a fully stocked bar, a collection of rare carved opium jars for stash and several thousand dollars' worth of the best in stereo equipment. It wasn't humble, but it was home.

The two men came in silently, Eddy heading for his bedroom to hang up his coat. The pensive mood still on him, Priest threw his hat and maxicoat on a chair. He walked to the terrace window, checking out the view, but not really seeing it. He got his silver snuffbox out and snorted, getting his head together. When Eddy came back into the room, Priest asked,

"We got anything here to eat?"

"I don't know, man," Eddy shrugged. "Maybe a piece of pie . . ."

As Priest rummaged in the refrigerator, Eddy took a gold cigarette case out of his suede pocket and lit up a joint. He strolled into the efficiency kitchen and hoisted himself companionably up on the counter top.

"I had to put Freddy out to work." Priest's head was in the fridge, his voice muffled. Eddy choked on the toke, coughing, exhaling and laughing all at once.

"Hey, man, you don't mean Fat Freddy?"

Priest found a piece of sweet potato pie. Breaking off a chunk, he stuffed it into his mouth, nodding yes to Eddy's question. Eddy rocked back and forth, unable to contain his mirth.

"You *didn't*, man! You gonna give that hard luck nigger a heart attack!" He broke off to remove his glasses and wipe the tears of mirth from his eyes. When he put the glasses back on his nose, Eddy noticed that Priest hadn't joined in the laughter. In fact, he was staring at Eddy with a long, steady, serious look. The stare had the effect of sobering the smaller man in an instant. He hopped down from the countertop as Priest brushed past him and went into the livingroom.

"Ah, what the fuck's wrong with you nigger, it's funny!" The joint had gone out. Disgusted,

he relit the reefer and followed Priest into the livingroom. The big man was seated on the couch, blowing coke from his snuffbox. Eddy threw himself down on the other couch and stared at Priest reflectively, his mind working.

"What is it, man? What did you wanna talk about?"

Priest didn't turn his head or change his expression. In a low but very serious voice, he replied, "I'm gettin' out, Eddy."

Eddy was taken completely by surprise. He sat straight up, disbelief written all over his regular features.

"Gettin' outta what?"

"The cocaine business."

Shock struggled with mirth in Eddy's expression. For a beat he sat still as a stone, then he uttered a short laugh, which he choked off almost immediately. His brain was racing around like a mouse on a wheel. This was heavy shit; much heavier than he'd been expecting. Eddy's eyes glittered; a lot was at stake here—*everything* was at stake here. He stood, his reed-slim body swaying like a dancer, then he began to jive, laying a heavy jiveass rap on Priest's quiet head.

"Oh, my Jesus! Them damn junkies done knocked something loose in your head, nigger!" He gestured around the room, the wave of his

hand encompassing all their joint possessions, expensive, fashionable and hard-earned. "You gonna give all this up? We got eight-track stereo, a color TV in every room. We can snort up half a piece a dope every day. Now, nigger, that's the *American dream, ain't it?* Ain't it?" He held his hand out to his partner, palm up, in the traditional "skin" gesture. Priest hesitated.

"You better c'mon man," Eddy urged.

Priest's handsome face broke into a grin of agreement and he slapped Eddy's hand, giving him skin. Eddy took a deep breath and a deep toke on his joint. It had gone out again. He relit it with trembling fingers while watching Priest snort some more cocaine. Priest was evidently fighting to keep his head together. For a moment there was a silence between the two men; Priest broke it.

"How much money we got, Eddy?"

The smaller man glanced sharply at his friend. Priest wasn't jiving, that much was evident. Eddy became serious immediately.

"We got just better than $300,000. But that's only one fifty to you, and that ain't enough to keep your nose open for a year." He drew deeply on the marijuana and looked earnestly at his friend. "I know it's a foul game, Priest, but it's

the only one the man left for us to play, and that's the stone cold truth."

Priest stood and squared his shoulders. He walked over to his partner and sat beside him, looking seriously into his face for Eddy's reaction.

"Eddy, I'm gonna run a number. I'm gettin' out with a half-million cash."

"You are man, and what about me?"

Priest smiled affectionately. "You my partner, fifty fifty."

Eddy's tone was scoffing, incredulous. "Let's get it straight. You talkin' about a *million dollars cash.*"

"Right, man, in just four months."

Eddy stared at Priest, speechless.

"We gonna take the three hundred thousand and buy thirty keys." Priest checked Eddy sharply for a reaction, but the smaller man remained expressionless, saying nothing and showing no emotion. Priest warmed to his rap, his enthusiasm growing stronger with every word. His eyes burned and his cheeks glowed. His long fingers waved expressively, the light glinting off the massive, masculine gold rings.

"The best shit in town, man. No cut on it, rocks and lumps as big as marbles. With the family we set up now, we can turn it over like I said,

in just four months. And, baby, we off the street for good, with a million cash!"

There it was, all laid out. The plan. Thirty kilos of pure, uncut "rock" crystalline cocaine. Some one thousand and eighty ounces. If the coke was *really* good, *really* pure and heavy with "rocks," it could easily be cut up to a four, "stepped on" four times. That meant it could be mixed with lactose, milk sugar and hydrous dextrose in the measure of one part coke to four parts mixer. Even stretched out to five times its original weight, it would give a fine rush and a mellow high. Then it could be dealt to and by "the family"—dealt in every measure from one-quarter teaspoon for ten dollars to a teaspoon for thirty to a tablespoon for one twenty five to one fifty. Or even by the "half-a-piece," or half an ounce, which might bring as high as two hundred fifty dollars. It would mean heavy, heavy dealing, but the money was there. More than three million dollars, with a million dollars to the dealer. But selling wasn't the problem; buying was. Thirty kilos of uncut coke—they had *never* dealt so high. It wouldn't be easy to find thirty keys, no shit. Eddy's mind was in a whirl, his thoughts racing. He stood and began to pace around the room like a caged animal, his juices flowing, his nervous energy at a high. He stopped in front of

Priest and demanded, "How long this been in your head? Man, you don't do nothin' overnight. Why didn't you tell me? I'm supposed to be your partner."

Priest sighed; he had anticipated this reaction. He'd known Eddy a long time. He spoke softly, but with deep feeling.

"I didn't want you shootin' at it, Eddy. I didn't need nobody puttin' doubts in my mind. Anyway, I'm tellin' you now."

Eddy laughed shortly, a harsh bark of sarcastic bitterness.

"You a fuckin' dreamer! Where you gonna get thirty keys at that price?"

"Scatter."

Now Eddy exploded. "You're crazy. Scatter told you when he got us started he wasn't sellin' no more coke."

"He'll do it one more time. He'll do it for *me*." Priest's voice held a conviction born of desperate urgency, a need to believe.

"Bullshit!" It was plain that Eddy didn't share Priest's conviction.

Priest's voice grew stronger, more urgent. "It's a chance, and I wanna take it. *Now*, before somebody ices me or I have to kill somebody." He turned to his friend and partner. "You with me, Eddy?"

Eddy walked over to the picture window. He, too, checked out the view for a long minute without seeing it. It was hard to read his face, his eyes hooded by the blue-tinted lenses, his mouth a straight line. He gazed down twentyfour stories to the tiny cars moving in the street below. Then he turned to Priest.

"Solid. You got it."

IV

Harlem on a Saturday night in the holiday season can take its place with any major capital of the world for glamor and excitement. More money changes hands there than at the tables at Monte Carlo. More expensive automobiles line the thoroughfares than drive down the Champs Elysees. More beautiful bodies—on men and women alike—swing into action than in swinging London. The threads are more fly and superfly than in Rome or downtown New York. Harlem has a life of its own, like noplace else on this planet; it is both a ghetto and a mecca, a lifeforce and a center of sin.

Eddy and Priest glided up Seventh Avenue in the Eldorado, music inside the car—Aretha—and music outside, pouring from every large nightclub and tiny chicken-and-ribs joint on the Avenue. Christmas decorations twinkled and shone

from every window, wreaths hung on many doors. The men were digging the action, the flash dudes with their bad bitches in hot furs and jewels, the huge automobiles illegally parked three and even four deep outside of the "in" dives, forcing Priest to do some fancy maneuvering with his slick wheel. Outside Scatter's place triple-parking was essential. The curbs were lined thickly with showy, expensive cars, the best that money could buy. Most of them were Cadillac Eldorados, customized. You could always tell the pimps' cars; they were pink or white or lavender and had fancy gold-plated scrollwork initials on the doors and bubble tops—not like Priest's sleek black model. But there were also long Lincolns, and flashy Jags and Mercedes and even a couple of Rolls Royces, looking like fat ritzy old ladies next to the trim lines and twinkling chrome of their low-slung sisters.

Running up and down between them were young boys of maybe 12 or 13, carrying heavy buckets of soapy water and clean rags. With the help of a few hopeful winos, they were washing the cars with loving care, scrubbing feverishly at the vinyl tops and the white-walled tires, carefully wiping down the heavily lacquered fenders and polishing everything chrome. Billows of

steam from the buckets curled up into the cold night air.

As Priest and Eddy climbed out of the Eldorado, the car washing kids made room for them to pass, greeting them with low murmurs of respect and admiration. Priest moved through the crowd easily, taking the time to make small talk, slap a few palms. Two boys who were scrubbing Scatter's own Rolls, a long limo with a Connecticut license plate, rushed forward and began washing Priest's instead. Priest laughed and wadded up a couple of five dollar bills, lofting them through the air to the kids.

Scatter's was crowded as usual; it was one of *the* places to be seen. The super fly people were assembled, dressed up and looking fine, very together and doing numbers. Everybody was out to have a good time—good food, good music, good vibes. There wasn't any room for dancing; there was hardly even room for standing still, but the girls were shaking that thing anyway, and the men were digging.

Eddy and Priest came in through the bar. They were stacked four and five deep there, the girls sitting on stools, their cute round asses in minis or stretch pants just a bunch of distraction. Behind them, rows of sharply-dressed men were buying the drinks, calling out their orders to the magi-

cian behind the bar, who managed to mix, serve, make change, rap with the girls, jef with the dudes and eat fried chicken from a basket by his register all at the same time. A low wall separated the bar area from the main dining room, and the two partners moved toward it. It took them almost twenty minutes to get there. They were greeted from all sides at the bar; everybody there seemed to know them. The cats offered five, and the chicks preened on their bar stools, stretching and showing off their tight little bodies and hard, high breasts, not taking their eyes off that dealer-man Priest for a minute.

Priest and Eddy spent a few minutes jiving at the bar, then slowly made their way into the main dining room. Intimate and warm, it was packed, the only table empty being Priest's regular table, held for him. It was a long room, with small tables placed very close together. Alongside one wall was a charcoal barbecue pit, Scatter's personal domain. The pit had a clear view of everything and everybody in the room and there Scatter stood, dressed in whites, a huge white chef's cap cocked on his head, basting the ribs. He was a dark-skinned man in his late fifties, wearing an old-style process with dignity. His large-nosed face was a street map of well-traveled roads, every line in it representing dues paid. Scatter com-

manded his restaurant like an admiral commands a flagship. Nothing escaped his notice. He was able to carry on several conversations at once with guests and waitresses, yet he still managed to comment whenever a good-looking woman entered the room, and that was often. When he saw Priest and Eddy his face lit up in a huge, overflowing smile, and he gave the pair the high sign.

Getting to the table was a procession. If they knew everybody in the bar, they knew twice as many everybodys in the dining room. Priest and Eddy stopped at nearly all the tables, shaking hands, smiling at the women, touching bases, making new contacts and renewing old ones. At last, they reached their own table and sank gratefully down into chairs. On the small stage before them, Curtis Mayfield and his boys were getting it on in fine style, Mayfield's intimate delivery ideally suited to Scatter's place and hip clientele. Priest smiled when he heard Curtis swing into "Pusher Man," it was one of his favorites.

PUSHER MAN

I'm your mama, I'm your daddy,
I'm that nigger in the alley.

I'm your doctor when you need—
Want some coke, have some weed.
You know me, I'm your friend
Your main boy thick and thin—
I'm your pusher man—
I'm your pusher man.

Ain't I clean, bad machine,
Super cool, super mean
Dealin' in for the man
Here I stand, Super Fly,
Secret stash, heavy bread
Baddest bitches in the bed
I'm your pusher man—
I'm your pusher man.

Silent life of crime—
Man of odd circumstance,
Victim of ghetto demands.
Feed me money for style,
And I'll let you trip for awhile
Insecure from the past
How long can a good thing last?
I'm your pusher man—
I'm your pusher man.

Heavy mind, heavy sign,
Makin' money all the time.
My lid and just me,
For all the junkies to see.
Ghetto Prince is my name—

Makin' love's how I swing.
I'm your pusher man—
I'm your pusher man.

Two bags please, for a generous fee.
Make your mind what you want it to be.
I got a woman I love desperately,
I wanna give her something better than me.
I've been told I can't be nothing else,
I'm just a hustler in spite of myself—
But I know I'll break it—
This life just don't make it!

Words and music by Curtis Mayfield © Camad Music Company 1972

When the song was over to a shouting round of applause and stomping, a waitress came over to take their order. She was young, superyoung, still in her late teens, and she had the shy, pretty grace of a prime filly. She interested Priest; his dark eyes checked her out intently and he was amused by the blushes that stained her brown skin darker.

"A glass of red," he ordered.

"Beer," from Eddy.

Unable to suppress her blushes, the waitress dropped her eyes to her order pad and began

writing. Only half-serious, Priest allowed his hand to stroke her waist. It then slipped down and played over her hip, only the tips of his fingers touching her flimsy skirt. The girl trembled, half in fear and half in longing, avoiding his penetrating gaze. Priest's hand abandoned her hip and gently ran along her arm, finally grabbing at her hand. As Eddy chuckled in delight, Priest's fingers reached their intended destination—the girl's pad and pen. He tore off his order and scribbled something on the back of it, then he folded it twice with the message inside. He smiled openly at the waitress, acknowledging his little joke at her expense. Returning her order pad and pen, he handed her the folded note separately.

"Give it to Scatterman personal."

Doubly embarrassed by her reactions to Priest and by Eddy's amused grin, the girl moved hastily away from the table, her long, slender legs flashing temptingly under the short skirt. Priest watched those legs hurry across to the barbecue pit, saw her hand his note in to Scatter, who scanned it and flashed him a broad smile as a signal of assent.

The heater in the parked Corvair made the only sound, a quiet humming purr. Judd and Fat

Freddy sat motionless, intent on the restaurant doorway across the street, one of the best-known eating houses in Little Italy, on Mulberry Street. They had been sitting there for more than two hours, long enough for even the most enthusiastic eater to *mange* his way through the antipasto, the *zuppa,* the pasta, the veal, the salad, the cannoli, the expresso and a bottle of vino. And now their patience was rewarded. The short man was coming out of the restaurant, his face shiny with good eating, a toothpick held daintily in his left hand, the one with the star sapphire pinky ring. He stood for a minute on the sidewalk, checking for sudden movements from the shadows, ready to drop to the sidewalk if a black limo should come careening around the corner down Broome Street. Satisfied, the man climbed into a discreet navy blue Cadillac and headed homeward.

The Corvair followed, at a discreet distance. Knowing the other car's destination, Judd could afford to lose sight of it every now and then, making sure he didn't turn up too often in the front car's rear-view mirror. Over the George Washington Bridge Judd speeded up a little, keeping the Caddy well in sight. At last the Caddy turned off the highway, down a side road into a respectable, upper-income residential block,

where $100,000 private homes were built close together as if for protection. The Caddy swung into a lighted driveway. Judd put his foot down hard on the gas pedal and gunned the Corvair into the driveway behind the larger car. He braked to a stop behind the Cadillac's rear bumper and switched on his high beams just as the short man stepped out of his car.

Freddy's plump dark figure scrambled quickly out of the Corvair. He wore a stocking mask pulled over his face and carried a pistol in his right hand. He stepped quickly up behind the white man and touched the gun to his ribs.

"Freeze!"

The man put up his hands.

"Don't look around!" ordered Fat Freddy.

The white man scowled. Without looking around, he snarled, "What're you doin'? You gonna be one dead nigger tomorrow."

Stung, Freddy reached out and pushed the man up against the garage door.

"You better spread your fuckin' Dago ass against that car, or you're gonna git killed right here in this driveway."

The white man obeyed, placing his stubby hands against the garage. Freddy started going through his pockets briskly.

"Gimme the money, man!"

"What money? I ain't got no money!" The Italian was truculent; he did not appear to be afraid.

"Don't give me that shit!"

The white man reached reluctantly into his pocket and grudgingly handed Freddy a sizable wad, which the fat man took and stashed.

"Where's the other one? All you wops carry two rolls!"

Trapped, with a muttered curse, the Italian surrendered the second roll of bills, thicker than the first. Freddy grabbed it and pocketed it, then backed off, keeping his pistol still aimed at the other's head.

"Now you just stay put an' don't move, or you'll get it," he threatened, jumping into the front seat beside Judd. The lieutenant gunned the motor and the Corvair shot backwards out of the driveway and roared off into the night.

"Cocksucker!" The Italian cursed bitterly into the empty air. As empty as his pockets.

Priest smiled as Scatter joined their table.

"I didn't wanta do it out here in front of the whole world, man," he apologized.

Scatter grinned from ear to ear, then laughed. "You done brought Scatter a *crowd stopper.* C'mon, what you got to say, young blood?" He

motioned for Priest and Eddy to follow him. The three of them walked past the tables, saying their hellos all over again. Priest smiled widely at K.C. in his fly threads, a sharp dude even though he was a pimp. K.C. was seated with three of his flashiest whores, beautiful bitches in the sharpest clothes and most expensive perfumes, drawn together only by mutual jealousy over K.C.'s affections. Usually, K.C. kept his girls well under control, but tonight the volcano erupted, just as Priest and Eddy were making their way past K.C.'s table. With a sudden scream, the table was overturned and two of the girls were going for each other's eyes with claws bared and murder in their hearts. Laughing, K.C., Eddy and Priest leapt nimbly to one side, but Scatter frowned. He ran a class operation, and no whores were going to make it look tacky. K.C. caught the frown and hustled the gals out of there.

The partners and the Scatterman walked through the kitchen and into a small storage pantry. It contained a meat locker; a huge metal door used for deliveries filled one wall. The three men were alone. A large butcher block table stood in the middle of the pantry; Priest perched on the edge of it and took out his snuff box. When he had snorted, he filled the coke spoon again and raised it in the direction of Scatter.

"Wanta blow?" He held the spoon directly under Scatter's nose.

Scatter grinned. "Now that's what I *need*!" He snorted twice, the coke disappearing up his broad nostrils, leaving only the tiniest trace of white, which Scatter removed with the back of his forefinger. He waited for the rush to subside a little, then faced the two younger men.

"What you come to see Scatter about?"

Priest spoke in deadly earnest, his serious face bent on Scatter's.

"Want to buy thirty keys. Me and Eddy put together three hundred thousand cash . . ."

The jovial expression disappeared from Scatter's face as fast as the coke had disappeared up his nose. His face hardened, became almost menacing.

"What you come to me for? I ain't dealin'. You know that, nigger."

Priest hadn't expected exactly this reaction. He was visibly shaken, but held tight to his control, keeping his voice level and making a massive effort not to let his nervousness show.

"Dig it, man. It's took a while but we done put together a family you wouldn't believe. I can deal thirty kilos in just four months, man. Four months and off the street for the rest of my life with over a million dollars cash."

The scowl deepened on Scatter's face. "Not through me. Them last fifteen keys I laid on you was all I had left."

Priest was so caught up in his dream of freedom it was as if he hadn't heard the older man, couldn't believe that Scatter would raise objections to the plan.

"But this is my chance, man. This is my shot! You can get it."

Now it was Scatter's turn for control; he struggled to keep his deep-running indignation from boiling over.

"I've done already give you one scholarship, young blood. Call myself givin' you a break. Nobody ever gave me nothin'. I told you up front that was *all*!"

Priest's temper flared. "Don't call ass on me, man! I can't get the price or the quality anywhere else."

Scatter's anger left his control and his voice grew louder and more contemptuous. "What you mean call ass? I laid on you the cocaine you used to *make* that three hundred thousand. Didn't ask for nothin' up front from you. Got your ass started! Now that was *it*! I'm retired. I ain't got no coke left!"

Eddy had been keeping silent all this time, knowing it was a matter strictly between Scatter

and his young blood. But now he broke in, his voice shrill, almost hysterical.

"Yes, but your line is still open. You can get it, nigger! We know you can get it!" As soon as he spoke, Eddy realized that he'd overstepped himself, put his foot in it. So did Priest and Scatter.

Scatter's control vanished; he was all instinct now, all gutter fighter on the defense. He pulled a gun from under his apron, his eyes bulging with rage.

"What you say? You threatening me?"

Too late, Eddy's hands dropped to his jacket. With lightning swiftness, Scatter slapped them away, ripped open Eddy's jacket and snatched the gun from the holster sewed into the lining.

"You mean you talk to me like that and you ain't already got a gun in your hands, nigger?"

Eddy froze, bent back over the chopping block, with Scatter angry as a mad bull above him, Scatter's gun pointing dangerously at his throat, Scatter's finger hovering dangerously near the trigger. As for Priest, he'd been caught off guard by the swiftness of the action. Now, recovered, he tried to make peace. He spoke gently, but earnestly.

"Man, put the gun down."

"You don't tell me what to do. Dis Scatter you talkin' to. Dis de Scatterman!" Scatter seemed

consumed by his anger, ready to go off like a can of nitroglycerine, at the smallest joggle. He grabbed Eddy's jacket by the lapels, pulling the small man forward and, as he did so, shoving the barrel of his gun into Eddy's mouth.

"I'll kill this nigger o' yours," Scatter threatened. The gun had cut into Eddy's lip and a trickle of blood ran over the barrel.

Priest's voice turned pleading, low and soft.

"Scatter, don't kill him, please! We just tryin' to get out. You know what it means, man! Please. . . . I'm sorry."

Slowly, Scatter pulled the gun back from Eddy's mouth. Slowly, he released the lapel of Eddy's jacket. Slowly, he pulled back from the table and straightened his back and shoulders, seeking to regain his cool. His eyes never leaving Scatter, Eddy stood up and wiped the blood from his mouth and chin. Priest came and stood by his friend's side. Both younger men kept their eyes on Scatter, and a long silence fell. Finally, Scatter spoke. He'd got his composure back and now seemed more annoyed than angry.

"I done made *more* than a million. And it didn't take me no four months to do. Took all my life. Duckin' bullets and goin' through shit like you puttin' me through now. I get caught with thirty keys, I die in jail." By now he was no longer

pointing the gun. In fact, he hardly seemed to know it was in his hand; it was merely a thing to hold, not a thing that could cut the heart right out of a man. Scatter motioned with his head to Priest and the younger man, nodding, picked up Eddy's gun and slipped it into his pocket. Scatter suddenly seemed to age before their eyes. His shoulders slumped, his face broke into sorrowful lines, and his voice softened as he addressed Priest directly.

"Why you come to me with this shit after all I done for you? I done told you I was gettin' out of this business."

Priest's voice changed, too. It was like that of a rebellious, chastised son to the father who'd caught him out. He spoke with great earnestness, defensively but with deep love.

"I thought you'd do it for *me*, man. I done washed your wheel, run errands for you. Ever since I was a kid, you was always *The Man*. Who the hell else could I go to? You were my main man, Scatter. My man."

Scatter swallowed. Priest's words had evidently moved him. Now he in his turn spoke defensively, and with love.

"Suppose your man get caught? You gonna take that chance for me? It's all the time I got left. It's all I got left, young blood. Means too

much to shoot it all at once for nothin'. I don't need no money . . ."

Priest broke in, pleading hard now, pleading for his future and every good thing in it.

"I can *do* it, man! I wouldn't have to go through all the *shit* you went through! I'll still be young. I can get into something, get my head straight. Do it for me, man, and you can depend on me for the rest of your life."

Scatter just looked at Priest and said nothing, merely tucked his gun back underneath his apron. But Priest understood that look, understood it well. Scatter had no wife, no son. Priest stood closer to him than any other person in this world, and the relationship went back, way back to when Priest was just a runny-nosed little mother fucker hustling jobs for nickels and dimes. Priest had worshipped the big man Scatter—he'd been a number one cocaine dealer, pusher only of the superfly snow for the nose that knows—and the older man had paid him back for that hero worship by kindnesses great and small. Now, Scatter was weighing the risk against the fatherly love he felt for Priest. He had him a high-class and profitable business. He didn't need the bread, didn't need the hassle, but the love would not be denied. Priest could dig on that. Suddenly, Priest made his resolve.

"Then turn me on to your man. Turn me on and you won't have to carry any weight at all."

Scatter turned to Priest. A smile of genuine mirth split his big, homely features. He laughed out loud in amusement.

"Honky would have me killed. I don't take *nobody* to him, young blood. He picks his own niggers. You got any coke left at all?"

Priest spoke coldly, not looking for small favors. "I got some to hold me, until I can score." Then he burst out, "Oh, I'll do it, man! Just take a lot longer, but I'll do it!"

But Scatter ignored the coldness. His manner was affectionate, even placating.

"Look, I got about a key . . . my own personal. You be here tomorrow night at one and pick it up. You should always have more on hand than you need."

Priest glanced up at Scatter, startled, hardly daring to believe his own ears. Scatter, realizing that he'd given in, gave in all the way.

"Maybe I'll do it for you," he said with a shrug. Then he took on a patently false sternness, throwing the phoney harshness of a loving parent into his words. "But this is the last time! You fuck it up, young blood, you on your own."

A smile of relief and gladness broke on Priest's face. He could feel the sting behind his eyelids

and taste salt in his throat. Eagerly, he grabbed for Scatter's shoulders, but the older man pulled away from the touch with outraged dignity. Instead, a long look passed between them, a look that spoke of years of love, of promises made for the future, of loyalty sworn and demanded. In that look, Priest laid his ass down the line for his whole future, but it would be worth it. Yes, he thought with a great surge of joyous exultation, it would surely be worth it!

V

Stepping from the pantry and kitchen into the restaurant was like stepping into another world. It seemed strange to Priest that the music and the laughter and the jiving should still be going on outside as if none of that heavy shit had gone down inside. Scatter's was even more crowded now than earlier, as the serious drinkers were loading up their last tankfuls before the bars closed for the night and they would have to seek shelter in the afterhours spots and gambling joints. New faces and hairdos, new wide hats and narrow suits, high heeled boots and alligator shoes, gold jewelry and diamond rings, leather vests with kneelength fringes—all vied for attention from Priest and Eddy. Priest spotted his lieutenant Judd and Fat Freddy sitting together at a table, making the meet as Priest had ordered. But they couldn't talk here. Priest snaked his way

through the crowd, slapping palms and jeffing, and made his way to the table. He touched Judd lightly on the shoulder and bent down to talk into his ear over the noise of the restaurant.

"Meet us up at Remey's after hours joint."

Then he fishtailed back through the crowd, joining Eddy at the door and they split.

Remey's was in a brownstone on 142nd Street, off Eighth. From the outside you could never tell it was anything but a private home, except for the superfly wheels double-parked along both sides of the street. To reach it, you went into the dim vestibule, rang the buzzer a certain number of specified beats—the signal changed every week—and waited for the door to buzz and unlock. Then you went down the hallway to the cellar door, and down a flight of steps to the basement, which was under street level and showed no light to the outside world.

Priest and Eddy carefully picked their way down the steps and through a storage room, then turned right down a long basement hall with low-hanging overhead pipes. Both were still a little shaky from the scene with Scatter, but they'd cooled out and mellowed their heads on some smoke and coke. Priest turned to Eddy.

"Hey, man, that was quite a number you pulled."

Eddy laughed. "Come on, nigger, you know damn well I knew what I was doin'." He held out his hand for a five and Priest slapped it with gusto.

"You was askin' that old man to put what little time he had on the line for you," Eddy marveled. "That's some heavy weight, man. Cat had a right to get mad, and you was comin' on like he owed it to you." Priest stared at Eddy, intent on his meaning. Reading this, Eddy expanded.

"I know how close you two are, man, but it blew his mind. He was ready to explode. I had to give the cat a chance to let that shit out without putting it on you. He was cool, 'cause he really *wanted* to do it for you." Eddy laughed to himself in wonderment. "Scatter's a deep old man . . ."

"A crazy old man, too," Priest interrupted. "He mighta popped a cap in your ass."

"Not with you standin' there, man."

"I hear you talking," Priest chortled in glee.

The hall led to Remey's, converted out of the largest storeroom in the basement. Just an ordinary bar with booths and a soul jukebox, but open at the right time. Priest greeted Remey with a handshake.

"I'll have some beer, man." Eddy decided to split and shoot some craps and Priest agreed.

"O.K., man, I'll see you tomorrow then." He sat back and took a pull on his beer, looked up to find Judd approaching his booth.

"Where's the fat man?"

"He had to pick up his wife."

A figure materialized at the side of the booth, a tall dude in an ivory-white suit with maroon shirt and hat to match, gold flashing at his wrists and knuckles and in his teeth. It was K.C., the pimp whose whores had attacked each other in Scatter's. Priest grinned broadly.

"Hey, K.C., you on my case or something?"

K.C. grinned back, flashing a small diamond set in his upper left front tooth.

"Looks that way. Hey, man, I had to get outta Scatter's place. Damn bitches about to drive me crazy." He laughed. "But they good to me. You see that big white pretty thing outside?"

Priest chuckled. "Yeah, the one with the ticket on it?"

"T.N.T., ain't nothing to it. They can put ten tickets on it. I ain't payin'. Them whores gotta pay for it." All three men laughed. They knew how it was. "Shit, man, you into anything good?"

Before Priest could answer, K.C. spotted Fat Freddy and his wife coming into the room. The girl was beautiful, young and much taller than

Freddy, slim but round in all the right places. She wore a micromini, cut low on top, and two sets of false eyelashes. She hung onto Freddy's arm as if he were the Aga Khan, worth his considerable weight in diamonds, but her eyes never left Priest's handsome face. Freddy wore his most sheepish expression, a mixture of pride and embarrassment. The comical contrast made the woman-wise K.C. grin; he tapped Priest and Judd on the shoulder and they grinned, too.

"Oh, my," breathed K.C. almost under his breath, "will you looka this shit here."

The happy couple slid into the booth. Freddy grinned, too.

"K.C. How you doin'?"

"What's happening, Freddy?"

"You all know my wife."

"Where you been all my life?" K.C. admired. "I gotta split. Good night, Mrs. Freddy. You-all take care now." The pimp snaked hipped in the direction of the door.

Priest turned his attention to Fat Freddy. "How did you do?"

The smile slipped from the fat man's face and he looked a little nervous.

"Beautiful, man." He took a large roll of money from his pocket and slid it across the table to Priest, who scooped it up and, holding it in his

lap, did a fast count. He peeled off some bills and handed them back across the table to Freddy.

"You made yourself a little extra."

Freddy beamed, all nervousness gone. "Yeah, I sure did."

As he reached for the bills, a hand as small and swift as a kitten's paw cut him off. Scooping up the loot, Freddy's wife cooed lovingly, "I'll hold it for you, baby." She folded up the bread and tucked it slowly and teasingly down the low-cut front of her dress into that pretty little bank that had probably seen more withdrawals than deposits.

Freddy's embarrassment brought a deeper color to his cheeks, but he managed to keep it together. He kissed his girl-wife nuzzingly, one eye open as he sadly watched the bread disappear into the breadbox.

"O.K. You hang onto it real tight for me."

Freddy looked across at Priest, expecting masculine amusement, but Priest's face was set in a serious expression, which made the fat man antsy again.

"Hey, baby," he suggested to his wife, "go play me somethin' on the juke box."

"What do you want to hear?"

"Anybody want a drink?" Judd volunteered.

"We cool." Priest was laconic.

Mrs. Freddy smiled like a TV commercial at the young lieutenant. "I'll have what you have," she purred.

"What'll you have?" asked the patient waiter.

"I'm just gettin' a beer," replied Judd.

"O.K." Mrs. Freddy looked as if she didn't mind *any* suggestion.

"Two beers," ordered Judd. He took out a handful of joints and laid them out on the table for sampling, lighting one up.

"Let me have a hit, man." Freddy toked, then wrinkled his short, round nose. "You get this from the Cuban?"

"Yeah, seventy-five dollars for the lightest ounce you ever saw, but it's good."

"I hear you." Freddy was gettin' off.

"How did we do tonight, Freddy?" Priest was businesslike.

"You pick up something." Mrs. Freddy sashayed off to feed the box quarters.

Priest was still unrelaxed, but not mean. "We didn't want to come down on you, man. Coke costs money. Somebody pays."

Freddy, only a little nervous, attempted a big smile. "I got no bitch."

Suddenly, Priest stretched and laughed. "Enough of that shit, we suppose to be celebratin'."

Judd seemed puzzled. Celebrating what? "What's goin' on?"

Priest realized that he alone was in on the joke. "Nothin', man. Really nothin'." He smiled. "Just sellin' cocaine as usual." He couldn't suppress a laugh.

Judd shook his head, still puzzled. Then he laughed, too, remembering good news. "Hey, Priest, I got a contact for weight. Can you meet some people tomorrow night?"

"I gotta cop tomorrow night at 1:00."

"Well, if you're doin' it downtown . . ."

Priest shook his head. "Uptown. Scatter's."

A sudden silence fell as Priest realized his error. A dumb mistake, *damn* dumb, to tell anybody where and when you going to be someplace. Ain't nobody's business except yours. Nobody seemed to pick up on it, though, and Priest shrugged off the feeling. Stevie Wonder on the box with the Supremes to follow, Mrs. Freddy slithered back to the booth.

"Hey, Judd, you got another one of those joints?" Freddy wanted to stay high.

"Only the best for our family." They all toked deep, and Freddy and his ever-loving wife began to get behind the grass, nibbling and kissing to the delight of the others.

The bathroom in Georgia's apartment was as comfortable as the rest of the place. Built in the days when craftsmen were still available, the room had tile moldings, a wide, deep sink with plenty of cabinet space and shelf room. But it was the bathtub that was the chief attraction. Built wide and deep, with a generous ledge all around to hold Georgia's ample collection of bath oils, bubble baths and perfumes. It was a bathtub built for two, and right now two were in it, up to their necks in bubbles.

Georgia looked adorable, with her long black hair pinned up out of the suds, wisps of it trailing and curling like ebony tendrils down her slender throat. The white sudsy bubbles of the bath were massed around her warm brown skin, concealing and revealing at the same time. Bubbles clung to her shoulders and arms, bubbles outlined her firm, full breasts with their dark brown nipples. In her long fingers she held a rough yet soft sponge, with which she was teasing the curly hairs on Priest's broad chest.

Priest was relaxing, his first real layback for days. His long body luxuriated in the feel of the warm, soft, womblike water, piled high with the bubbles and smelling delicious. He could feel the water lapping at his skin, feel Georgia caress his skin with her loofah-sponge, feel her body brush-

ing against his as they touched in the tub. His eyes relaxed at the sight of her beauty. He remembered the joint burning in his fingers, and took a deep toke. As he did, he thought he detected a look of pained disapproval in Georgia's large eyes and, slightly annoyed, he doused the reefer in the tub and flicked it away.

"Didn't have to do that because of me." Georgia's voice was so even as to be almost expressionless.

Pissed off, his mood broken, Priest sat like a wooden Indian rising from the water.

"You made me feel guilty." He did not look at her.

Georgia glanced over at him and became angry.

"You don't look like you feel guilty. You look like you always look."

Pettishly, she slapped the surface of the water with her hand, so that it rose and splashed Priest all over his face. He didn't move as the water ran down his cheeks. Instantly contrite, she moved closer to him and gently dried the droplets off with the sponge. Her anger slipped away as she touched him, and she forced a small smile. When his face was dry, she began to play with the sponge in the water, floating it aimlessly, avoiding his eyes.

"Listen, Priest, I know how you feel sometimes when you come in here. I can feel from you what it's like out there. I see what it does to you, and I know how dope helps hold your head together. I don't want your privacy, baby. I just want to share the weight." She looked deeply into Priest's eyes, trying to make that vital connection, trying to show him the depth of her emotion, make him feel her concern for him.

"Let me in," Georgia pleaded. "I don't want to be just somebody else you got to deal with. I love you, baby."

But Priest still did not move, registered no emotion. He might as well have been the wooden Indian he resembled. Frustration turned to rage and Georgia lost control. Balling up her small fist, she aimed a blow at Priest's head. Lightly, effortlessly, he caught her slender wrist in his large hand, shaking his head at her. He laughed, a boyish sound of real delight, so infectious that she had to laugh, too. Then he moved toward her and kissed her, his mouth hot on hers, his tongue exploring deeply. She came into his arms as naturally as a baby bird seeks the nest.

Their bodies twisted easily in the water as they clung and kissed, caressed and murmured. He was strong, and she was beautiful, and their

lovemaking lasted a long, long time. She climaxed again and again under his thrusts, moaning and sobbing until he, too, reached his peak with a rush like cocaine. And they were quiet together, resting in the cooling water.

The sunlight stole in through the bars covering the loft's skylight, as the two lean men circled each other like graceful panthers, each searching for openings in the other's defenses. In the little more than a year since Priest had been studying karate, he had come up fast, his natural strength, health and agility making him an adept.

Now he was in the most advanced stage of karate training, the "Jiyu Kumite," a kind of free style sparring in which everything he'd ever learned was used without hindrance. As his instructor feinted and delivered a hard chop to the chest, Priest stepped nimbly back and kicked his right leg out in the mawa shi geri, the roundhouse kick. The karate master went crashing to the floor. Priest stepped back as the instructor rose to his feet on the mat, both men bowing in the traditional manner, tipping their bodies slightly forward.

"You're getting better, Priest," the instructor approved ungrudgingly. "Let's go again."

Priest smiled and smoothed the rumpled *gi* he was wearing. Born to jungle fighting, his body a sharpened weapon of survival, Priest loved the cool way his body's instincts functioned, loved the essential Japanese paradox of ceremony, politeness and controlled violence that is karate. Karate—the "empty hand," as it means, turning the weaponless adept into a human weapon himself.

"O.K.," he agreed. "But then that's it. I got to go meet Georgia."

The two men circled again, feinting and blocking. A sudden forward side thrusting kick—the yoko geri—sent Priest to the mat. His instructor waited with politeness and the dealer got to his feet with a grunt, and backed off, but the politeness turned to surprise as he in his turn went down under a brilliantly executed mae tobi geri, the forward jump kick.

As the student and master dodged and feinted, kicked and lunged, part of Priest's mind was on the events of the night to come. The score itself —only one key—was minor. What was really on his mind was the question of Scatter. Would he have set it up with The Man? For thirty keys? Could he pull it off? Would there be trouble?

As he hit the floor one last time under the adept

foot of a fifth dan, Priest smiled to himself. In the trouble ahead, would karate help? And would it be the violence or the finesse of the art that would help him the most when he needed it?

VI

Fat Freddy was not ordinarily a man of violence, but he was beating the piss out of somebody, for sure. It was early morning in midtown New York, another cold, clear day, and some poor mother was getting his lumps in a vacant lot on 54th Street, between First and Second. The fat man was wheezing with the effort, but he smashed his right down again and again into the other man's face. The power of Freddy's right fist was augmented by the fat man's weight, and by the pair of heavy brass knuckles that cut deeply into the other man's head. The poor bastard struggled to get up, but Fat Freddy sat astride, beating him viciously and almost mechanically. So intent on kicking ass was Freddy that he didn't hear the patrol car drive up, didn't even see the cops until they had torn him bodily from his victim and jammed him up against the wall. The

gun he tried to draw was twisted out of his hand and the barrel rapped him sharply across the nose, drawing blood.

One patrolman kept him there at gunpoint, while the other carried the knucks and the plastic-wrapped spoons of coke back to the patrol car and radioed back to the station.

"Yeah. We're waitin' on an ambulance now. Don't know, when we got here they were already beatin' each other half to death. Two black males. One of them tried to pull a gun when we tried to apprehend him. Dope dealer called Fat Freddy. Yeah, cocaine. Soon as they get here."

In the interrogation room, Freddy knew for sure that he was messed up. These weren't no ordinary cops, or even ordinary narcs. There were four of them, a chief inspector and three detectives. Three mean Irish mother fuckers and one holy terror of a German. And they wanted something off of Freddy. They wanted it bad. And it wasn't money. Whatever take they were on, Freddy wasn't big enough to feed it.

Freddy sat on a low chair in the dimly lit room. He could make the inspector out clearly, as he loomed above him in shirtsleeves, an ageing, puffy, Aryan type, but the detectives' faces receded into the dimness. Tears mingled with the blood on the fat man's face; the face itself was

screwed up into a mask of terror and pain. His hands were held before him, cuffed, the too-small handcuffs biting deeply into Freddy's wrists. His hands were discolored and swollen with blood and, as the fat man muttered incoherently, Young, one of the detectives, leaned forward and gave a hard, vicious twist to the chain between the cuffs. Freddy screamed in agony; he wasn't built to withstand torture.

Inspector Storz' voice cut sharply through the screams. "You mean you beat a man half to death because he touched your wife's hand?"

Freddy tried to explain in incoherent sobs. "It was more than that to me . . . he shouldn't have done it . . ."

"What about this?" Storz laid the .45 and a couple of dozen spoon-sized bags of coke on the table in front of Fat Freddy. The fat man gazed blindly through his tears at the stuff on the table, but he couldn't find words to answer. He gazed dumbly at the inspector, his face pleading.

Storz decided to change his tack. "Look, if you're a smart guy maybe I can help you out. I don't want to take a two-bit hustler like you into court. Waste my time, the court's time and the city's money. But I'll do it, and with your record, nigger, your ass is cooked for twenty to twenty-five years easy! Now, c'mon, chump, we

don't want you. I can put you back on the street. Give me your man. I want the crud you work for."

Fat Freddy choked on his tears. "Man, you know I can't do that!"

"Bastard," hissed the inspector and, as though it was a signal, Young hit the fat man in the gut with all his vicious might, without warning. At the same time, Regan punched him in the head and O'Rourke clipped him in the back of the neck. Freddy was messed up, sure enough.

On this cold, clear day, unaware of what was going on in the precinct downtown, Priest and Georgia were enjoying some leisure time together. She brought him a feeling of real peacefulness, thought Priest, gazing at Georgia's bright lovely face under the fur hat. They had dressed for the weather, Georgia in a white mink coat with matching off-the-face bowler, Priest wearing a dark-pelted maxi that retailed on Madison for four thousand and cost him six hundred uptown, slightly warm from "falling off the truck." They walked close together, Georgia clinging to her lover's arm, stopping frequently to kiss. They'd strolled through Central Park, watching the youngsters playing in the snow that still miraculously remained clean. They'd followed

the side streets to the East River Drive, where they stood for a time watching the river and just digging each other, digging the warmth that human bodies can generate on even the coldest day. They had laughed a lot, talking in low tones, and kissed again and again, mingling the steam from their breaths, and feeling the cold tip of nose brushing cheek.

Now, they were back in the park again, heading west to Georgia's house. They paused on a stone bridge, one of the many lovely settings in the park in winter.

"Why do you need the money so much, Priest?" Georgia asked. "Maybe you should get out now, before something really bad happens. I could be happy with a plain life . . . a poor life, even, if only you were . . ."

Priest didn't let her finish. His voice was tinged with heat, annoyance not against her, but against the system.

"What would I do, Georgia? With my record I can't even work civil service, or go in the damn Army. If I quit now when I took all this chance with nothin' I go back to bein' nothin' with some jive job for chump change."

She could hear the contempt in his words, and tried to temper it.

"What'll we do when you get out?" she asked whimsically.

"I don't know."

She had not really expected an answer to the impossible question, but she was enjoying the game, that beautiful "what if?" game that lovers so often play. Priest, too, found himself charmed by the game, drawn into it and into her playful mood. He pulled her close and tweaked the tip of her nose. But despite himself her question had made him think, and his thoughts had altered his mood. And so it was not playfully but seriously that he continued.

"Not so much what we do . . . it's having a choice. To be able to decide what it is I want. Not just be forced into a thing because that's the way it is. Gonna buy some time, baby, that isn't all fucked up with things we gotta do. Just to be *free*. At least have the time to decide what it means."

Georgia's mood changed to match Priest's. She touched his arm lightly, making him turn his head to look deeply into her eyes.

"Will it make you happy, baby?"

"I don't know. I know I can't be happy the way it is now, or ever was."

They searched each other's eyes for the truth,

smiling at the love they found there. And the smiles built into laughter, precious laughter.

Downtown, there was no sound of laughter, only the sound of sobs, deep wracking sobs. Fat Freddy slumped over in his low chair, his head on his chest, and his mouth hanging open. He was crying, crying with fear and pain and regret. Under the two-fold barrage—the inspector's promise "I can put you back on the street," and the heavy punches from the ham-fisted cops—Freddy had broken. He'd told them everything. Given them Priest's name and description. Worse, he'd even told them about the pickup that night at Scatter's. Now they knew just where to find Priest. No wonder the fat man was crying.

Storz cut through the sobs. "This Priest, does he work for somebody?"

"No, him and his partner independent."

"How big is the family?"

"About fifty now, maybe better."

The inspector jerked his head in obvious surprise. "Fifty! You say you been with him a year. How much coke did he move in that time?"

"They was just settin' up. But I guess they done about fourteen or fifteen keys."

There was a long pause while the chief inspector digested this bit of information. Then

he got to the more pressing topic. "This key he's pickin' up tonight, what time?"

"One o'clock."

That was it. Fat Freddy had been drained dry. There was not one more useful tidbit to be pulled out of his fat head, or beaten out of his fat ass. The four white men stood looking down at the cowering black. Finally, Regan asked, "What should we do with him?"

"Take him downtown and book him."

"What's the charge?"

"You read the arresting officer's report," snapped Storz. "I don't make deals with trash like that."

Shock and surprise mingled with the pain on the fat man's face. He had allowed himself to believe that white mother fucker's promise to let him go free. He had *made* himself believe it. Now he watched in horror as the detectives pulled him up out of his chair and marched his rubbery legs to the door. He felt numb all over, out of it. He could hardly feel the front steps of the precinct outside as they led him down to the street. But as soon as his feet touched the sidewalk, Freddy seemed galvanized into action. His hands still manacled in front of him, he began to run.

He couldn't hear the detectives behind him shout for him to stop, didn't see them pulling

their guns. He hardly noticed the squad cars double parked at the curb in front of the precinct. Blindly, he dashed through them into the street. He didn't see the taxi coming down the street doing fifty, didn't feel the impact of metal against his soft body. He didn't know that he was hurtling through the air or being dashed to the street. Fat Freddy wouldn't see, hear or know anything ever again.

VII

Priest walked fast after he picked up the key at Scatter's. Something, some instinct he could never put a name to, born out of years of gutter fighting, was telling him to be careful, very careful. Also, he thought he could smell pig nearby. Some restlessness in the air or on the street, told him that police wasn't very far away. He glanced at Eddy, sitting double-parked in the Eldorado outside Scatter's place; no agitation there. Eddy didn't notice nothin'.

Priest decided to pass him by, to give his instincts a chance. He walked past the Eldorado as if he'd never seen it before, walked on down the block. Further down and across the street he saw an unmarked car parked at the curb, with two white men sitting in front. Police! Didn't those dumb mother fuckin' pigs know that white stood out at night in Harlem? Pretending to pay

no attention, he passed the detectives' car by and turned the corner.

At once one of the men in the front seat picked up the car's radio phone.

"He just turned the corner. You should be able to see him now."

Priest, having rounded the corner, walked a few feet further and then ducked into an alley. Just as he did he heard a car across the street start up. Its lights went on, and it pulled quickly away from the curb. In seconds, its headlights had filled the alley, illuminating every inch. Priest froze. Then he heard a starter grinding, and he turned to the wall, pretending to take a piss. The car stalled for a moment, then pulled away, leaving the alley dark.

Directly across the street from the alley, O'Rourke sat in the front seat of the second car. He, too, was on the phone.

". . . Been in there a long time. Wait! Here he comes now. Yeah, headed back to you. O.K. you follow directly, and I'll stay close, in case you need me."

Priest backtracked, then turned another corner, still giving the Eldorado the go-by. This was a quiet street of sleeping brownstones, the kind that have the old "speakeasy entrance," down three steps to a tiny front courtyard under the

main stoop. Priest had made it halfway down the block when the car pulled up and three white men hit the street running. Before he could cut out around them, they had him slammed up against the building wall. Seconds later a fourth white man appeared, holding a gun on Eddy.

The two blacks were pushed down the stairs to the tiny courtyard and up against the wall. Four flashlights clicked on, four beams formed a circle surrounding Priest and Eddy. The partners could not see the men behind the lights, couldn't make out any features. Four white blurs loomed out of the darkness. Eddy and Priest looked down, to keep the painful lights out of their eyes.

Storz' voice cut through the blackness. "You just picked up a key of cocaine from Scatter. You work for Scatter?"

"What is this shit?" demanded Eddy, but Priest said nothing. His brain was racing. Who could have betrayed them? Scatter himself? Priest dismissed the notion, unwilling to believe it. But who else besides Scatter and Eddy knew of the pickup? Christ! Judd and Freddy! That fuckup last night in Remey's. Priest's quick mind considered both, then selected Freddy as the pigeon. Weak, fat, vulnerable little man. I bet that mother fucker talked his head off,

thought Priest. I'll kick his ass all the way to Bedford Stuyvesant! I'll lean on him and hurt him bad!

Meanwhile, Young was threatening Eddy. "He's askin' the questions," he growled, jerking his thumb at Storz. "Answer him!"

Storz kept his voice icy. "I know Scatter hasn't been dealin' direct for over a year. But he managed to move fifteen keys anyway and he just ordered thirty more."

A light broke in the east for Eddy. "You Scatter's man?" he asked in incredulous delight. Priest winced at Eddy's big mouth and kept his own shut.

"Are the thirty keys yours?" pursued Storz.

"Why don't you ask Scatter?" Priest offered. But it was too late. Eddy had already blurted out, "Yeah." And, with a hesitant look at Priest, "They ours."

"You don't have to cover for Scatter. He wants out anyway," said Storz pleasantly. "I've been looking for some people to carry his weight."

"Why didn't you ask Scatter about us?" Priest was still suspicious. He still smelled pig.

"I have my own ways of finding things out. When I learned how big you two were, I wanted to meet you myself." Storz laughed, an unpleas-

ant, uncheery sound that had little to do with a laugh. "I don't go through Scatter. He works for *me*."

Eddy was tentative. "What we talkin' about?"

"Ten thousand a key. You do all right on this thirty, you get an open line plus credit. Any problem with that?"

Eddy broke into smiles. "No, *man*!"

"One of my people will contact you tomorrow to set it up. He'll give you a phone number. If you have any trouble with the police or if something happens I should know about, call that number."

The inspector extended his hand through the pools of light to Eddy, who took it and shook it heartily. "After we do business together for awhile," the white man continued, "you can deal directly with me. You'll find me to be good, stand up people." The four men clicked their flashlights off without another word, climbed the three short steps into the street, and drove off in the two unmarked cars.

Priest and Eddy remained standing in the tiny courtyard below the street. Eddy let out his breath in a gigantic "whooosh" of relief, then a yell of laughter.

"What's wrong with you?" Priest sounded as annoyed as hell.

Eddy turned to him in the darkness, surprised. "What's wrong with me? That was The Man, baby! We in, we got the main line! This honky sounds like he can even keep the police off us. There's cats like that out there, you know. We gonna be bigger than Scatter ever dreamed of being."

But Priest couldn't shake his annoyance or suspicion. He wasn't used to being treated in this manner, even by whitey. Also, how had they got to Freddy? Nor did he like the way Eddy had jumped in with both feet in his big mouth. But he restricted himself to merely reminding curtly, "You forget what we in this for."

Eddy was jubilant, exultant. "That was before this went down," he cried. "Man if we can make a million in four months what can we do in four *years*? Can you dig that?"

Priest did not reply, but turned his back.

Eddy was caught up in his own fantasy now, a fantasy of unlimited wealth and power. "I bought that trip of yours about gettin' out because I didn't have anything else. But what am I gonna do after *I* get out? All I know is dope, takin' it and sellin' it. End up bankin' some other small-time dope dealer." Eddy turned to look Priest full in the face.

"You got this . . ." Eddy searched for the right

word ". . . fantasy in your head about gettin' out of this life, and settin' that other world on its ear, but whut the fuck else can you do except hustle . . . besides pimpin'." He could see Priest was really angry, but he pressed on. He couldn't back down now.

"And you really didn't have the stomach to do that. I can't. If it wasn't for you, I'd probably be O.D.'d by now and not have a shot at all. I'm just tryin' to be real about it, man. What else can we do? Maybe this is what you been lookin' for and growin' to. Just think about it, man. Don't throw it up 'til you think about it." He spoke very carefully, determined to bring Priest around to his point of view.

"I'm thinkin' about thirty keys."

Eddy smiled. "We gotta cut it and deal it. Let's get this shit on!" He held out his hand to his partner, a broad smile masking his anxiety. Priest slapped it.

VIII

Dealing. This was what it was all about. Gettin' your hands on superfly coke, the best, rocks as big as your pinky. Cuttin' it on a two or maybe a two and a half . . . milling it real fine. Dextrose and lactose and that fine cocaine . . . cousin cocaine, as Mick Jagger sings it. The snow. The happy dust. The nose candy. Get you high, keep you ballin'. So what if it rots out your head, burns up your nose tissues, blasts holes in your brain? Up, high, and ballin'. I wanna take you high . . . er! Old Sly know.

Dealing the coke. Stepping on it and bagging it and passing it along. The lieutenants come up to the stash. A quiet apartment in Bed-Stuy, in a housing development. Blacks coming and going every minute in Bed-Stuy, who'll notice another three? The best men come, the ones with the contacts for heavy weight. They pick up the

larger envelopes, the "quarters," the "half-a-pieces," the "pieces." Everything from the tablespoon to the ounce. Now, dig. The lieutenant will cut it again before it gets out on the street, cut it on a three, or, if he's dealing small, maybe to a four. A pyramid, with Priest and Eddy sitting high on the apex.

Now from the dealer to the lieutenant to the pusher. The pusher is your street man; he knows who wants to score for their *personal* use. And the pusher, he brings you the nose candy. A little at a time, a cap for ten bucks. He may also be into reefer, poppers, up and downs. Quaalude, maybe. He goes where the parties are, where the people want to snort. Do a little coke. Things go better with coke.

The pusher brings it backstage to the rock concert, and the long-haired, skinny-hipped boys in the flowered shirts and belled jeans, their fingers resting nervously on their amplified guitars, they'll take a spoon. Music go better with coke.

The fine, fly offices up on Madison. The guys in the blazers and striped shirts are good for fifty each. Ads go better with coke.

That fresh young couple in the west village, who ball every night and bring in friends to watch. Pusher man is a welcome guest in that loft, because sex go better with coke.

I gave my love a valentine one February 14th; it had a spoon of coke wrapped in silver paper tucked inside and it said that there was always a place in my parkin' lot when he needed a little coke and sympathy. Thank you, Stones.

Pusher man goes to the best places. Easthampton in the summer, where the straights and the gays and their artistic, rich-bitch friends all snort. But they don't know shit. They'd get high snortin' sugar if you pushed that.

Coke in Harlem, coke in Queens, coke in Bed-Stuy, and on Park Avenue. Cole Porter got no kick from cocaine, but everybody else does, dearie. Everybody gets mellow when the pusher man comes. It may have been stepped on a lot, and it may addict you, but sheeit! Who wants to live to be old when you can live to get high?

So, up it comes from South America, from the Andes—Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, where the natives chew the coca leaf because breathing is hard and energy low that far above sea level. It's refined down and smuggled in. It comes in through Mexico and Florida. Some even truck it up all the way to Canada and bring it through there. It comes in ounces and pounds and kilos.

And thirty of those nice fat Latin American keys came to Priest and Eddy. And they stepped on it and called in the lieutenants and sent it on its

way, weaker and weaker in smaller and smaller quantities to the street. Where it reached the people and got them high. And made the pusher rich. And made the dealer rich. It made the manufacturer of plastic bags and rubber bands and aluminum foil rich. And The Man, the big man up there under his mantle of power, The Man, so corrupt that his soul must stink to heaven, The Man who hides behind his appointed office, pretending to be on the side of the law but really on the side of the devil himself—well, The Man got very, very rich.

And all off a little high, a little happy dust high. Dig it.

IX

The Eldorado moved slowly through the heart of Bedford Stuyvesant. Priest drove, with Eddy up front beside him. This was the real ghetto, the place the tourists never got to see. Nothing colorful or flash about Bed-Stuy; the street the boys were driving down looked like Berlin after the war. Some of the houses were boarded up, others no more than gutted hulks. Some of the wreckage was obviously the result of arson, while other buildings were crumbling from old age and decrepitude. Stores, even the open ones, kept iron gates over the windows. At one point in the street Priest had to drive up on the sidewalk to avoid a huge pothole filled with water and ice.

Young boys, already defeated by life, stood on the corners or huddled in doorways. Soul music came from a hundred different radios on the

block, radios in stores, in apartments, on the street. The result was a cacophony of formless sound, with only an occasional recognizable strain. At the end of the street was Priest's destination, a small, run-down bar. Outside the entrance, five or six young bloods in their late teens and early twenties were hanging out. Two of them wore denim work jackets and overalls; the others were clad in near-identical black leather jackets and berets. One wore a woollen cap and muffler knitted in the black power colors, red and green and black.

Priest and Eddy pushed their way past the young men and entered the bar, giving skin to the bartender. The partners moved down the bar to a table in the back and sat down. Less than a minute later three of the young bloods from outside came into the bar and were moving abruptly down to Priest's table. They stood directly over him, looming tall. The one who appeared to be their leader spoke.

"We'd like to talk to you, brother."

Priest was not unfriendly. But not friendly, either. "We're waiting for some people, man."

As if he hadn't heard, the leader pulled out a chair and sat down across from Priest and Eddy. His two friends remained standing, flanking him

like bodyguards. He smiled; it was not a friendly smile.

"It won't take long, brother. Besides you got time for your brothers. Black folks sure treat you good. Put *fur* on your back." As he said this he reached over and stroked Priest's maxi-coat. Then he sat back and his voice hardened. "And long money in your pocket." He leveled his gaze and directed it into Priest's eyes. "You owe them people somethin', man."

Neither Priest nor Eddy registered emotion. Eddy kept his eyes fixed firmly on the three militants, while Priest ignored them and looked straight ahead out the door.

Without looking at the speaker, Priest said quietly, "No bet."

The young black's eyes narrowed and he brought his goateed chin a millimeter closer to Priest. "Dig it, dope peddler, we out here building a new nation for black people, and that's *you*, man! We tryin' to do somethin' for *you*, dope peddler!"

Mechanically, not interested at all, Priest replied, "I ain't dealin' heroin."

The young militant's hostility flared. "We don't care what kind of dope dealer you are! It's time you started *payin' dues*, nigger!"

Somehow, although nobody had seen it hap-

pen, the gun appeared in Priest's hand. He held it low, barely showing above the table, but aimed straight at his adolescent hassler.

"Listen, young boy . . ."

The militant youth started to rise.

"Sit down!" Priest commanded, and the boy sat back down, startled. "If I didn't think you were young and crazy enough to be for real, I'd hurt you. I ain't givin' you *shit*! I carry heat every day, and if you heard about me, you know I'll use it. Now you go get a gun, and all those black people you keep talkin' about get guns, *ready to go down.* And I'll be right up front *killin' whitey*! Now, if you can't do that . . ." Priest slowly moved his hands back under the table, and once again directed his gaze out the front door. His voice was now ice-cold, and he didn't bother to look at his opponents.

"We through talkin', and like I said before I'm waitin' for some people. Don't let 'em find you at this table."

The young militant stood, and the three of them stood silent for a moment, then turned and walked out of the bar. Two sharply dressed dudes brushed past them on the way in. They greeted Eddy and Priest warmly, sitting down at their table. Priest brought his finger tip out from under the table; on it was a mound of white pow-

der. One of the men leaned forward, ducked his head and snorted quickly.

"You always got superfly shit," he praised. "Priest got it, you know it's ba.a.a.d." He laughed. "How much you got?"

"More than you need." Priest was laconic, even a little disdainful.

The other did not like Priest's jest a whole bunch but he smiled. Business was business. "What kind of a cut will it take?"

"That snort you just had was on a four."

"No shit?" The pusher all pleased excitement. "What kinda money we talkin' about? Let's get it on!"

Priest nodded, and the four men got up and left the bar together. They stood on the sidewalk for a minute or so, getting details straight. Then they all slapped hands, and Eddy went off with the Brooklyn pushers. Priest climbed back into the Eldorado; on the front seat beside him was a superfly bottle of wine, vintage wine from France.

Priest carried it past the flakey doorman of Cynthia's building. He dug to see that racist cat squirm. Struttin' in so flash under the canopy in his bad threads and million-dollar boots, his gold rings and panther physique. Do you got it, flaunt it! Just knowing what that Park Avenue flunkey

asshole must be suffering made Priest feel good all over.

Sex with Cynthia made him feel good all over, too. She had a natural hunger, a desperation born of boredom and dissatisfaction. She had so much, she wanted more. And more. Priest was probably the only stud she had who didn't have to call out the reserves. After sex, she served the wine. Elegantly. The fireplace in the handsome livingroom had a well-mannered little blaze going, all neat crackles and wood-scented smoke. The record player was on at moderate volume, Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini. Cynthia, wearing a metallic-threaded see-through dress that must have cost twice the doorman's weekly pay envelope, brought the wine in on a silver tray, with cheese and fruit arranged around it. Priest, his suede two-tone shirt unbuttoned, opened the bottle, while Cynthia poked uselessly at the fireplace.

"Those friends of mine want to buy a pound of coke."

Priest was amused. "Without being into it, baby, you're the best dealer I have."

He was joking, but Cynthia missed the point. "Is that why you come up here?" she bridled, in that neurotic tone that skinny girls so often develop instead of breasts.

Priest disturbed, arose from the couch and walked around the room. He turned to look at the white girl with a pained expression.

"Why do you want to hassle me, Cynthia?"

Cynthia reached for a wineglass with a nervous, petulant gesture. "I mean it, Priest. You just drop by whenever you want to. I haven't seen you for weeks! Why do you come here at all?"

"You know how I feel about you, Cynthia."

"No, I don't. I'd like to, though." Her voice faltered, dropped to a near-whisper. "I know exactly how I feel about you." She stood up and went to turn off the record player. Turning, she looked expectantly at Priest while she waited for an answer. His brows furrowed, he stalked around the room. He made a few false starts, then he began talking, very slowly. He seemed to have trouble finding the right words in the right order. He was looking into his own head, surprised at what he was finding there, trying to get his shit together.

"When I was a kid, baby, I thought this whole number was what I wanted. This was what I was supposed to want. The wine, the music . . . and a woman like you."

Cynthia set her wine glass down carefully and walked over to Priest.

"And, now . . . do you still think so?" There

was a measure of anxiety in her voice, of uncertainty.

"I don't know . . ." He tried to say more, but at that moment the housephone rang. While Cynthia went to answer it, Priest began buttoning up his shirt, getting ready to cut out. Suddenly, Cynthia turned to him, puzzled.

"There's a Scatter, or Scatterman, to see you."

Priest was completely dumbfounded. "Send him up . . ."

"What's happening, who's Scatter?"

Priest was desperately trying to get his head straight. He didn't *know* what was happening. How had Scatter found him? Nobody but Eddy knew about him and Cynthia . . . Eddy! But why? What could Scatter want? He turned impatiently to Cynthia. "Go on in the bedroom, I don't want you out here."

"But this is *my* apartment . . ."

Priest cut her off savagely.

"Just do what I tell you," he commanded.

Cynthia split, half in anger, half in terror. Priest stood alone, trying to collect his thoughts. He'd rarely been less together. The doorbell rang. As Priest opened the door, Scatter stormed past him and into the room. He was in a highly agitated state, strung out and scared shitless. Priest had never seen the older man on the thin

edge of panic before. Scatter had always been in command.

"How'd you find . . . ?" Priest began, but Scatter cut him off.

"I ain't got time for that shit, nigger. I need some money!"

Priest's eyes opened wide in surprise and disbelief. "You comin' to me for bread, man?"

Scatter appeared to grow hysterical. "You can't understand that, can you?" he shrieked. "All the money you know Scatter done made. I own that restaurant and damn near *two square blocks.* Call myself gitten white . . . bank notes, mortgages, *all just paper.* And that won't do me no good now. *I need cash!*" Shocked at the sound of his own voice, he turned away from Priest and fought with himself for control, tried desperately to calm down. As though to himself, he began to ramble.

"Maybe you can do somethin' with all that shit one day, young blood."

"What you talkin' about, man?" Priest asked in consternation.

"I done made it all over to you in my will. Didn't have nobody else."

Suddenly, emotion overtook Priest. He couldn't look at Scatter. He turned away and bowed

his head. When Scatter noted this he became angry with himself.

"God damn, I didn't mean to come up here to embarrass you. I'm runnin' for my life!"

Priest became alarmed on the instant. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"We in trouble. Man's tryin' to kill me!"

"What man?"

"The man you bought them thirty keys from. He won't let me retire. And *I trusted him.* We come up together. I turned him on when he was just a rookie cop."

Priest looked up in surprise.

"That's right, your man is a *pig*, young blood. He just been waitin' to see if you could handle the action. Now he don't need me anymore. I know too much."

"How do you mean we *both* in trouble?" Priest spoke anxiously.

"Don't square up, nigger." Scatter was his own scornful self for a moment. "If he's tryin' to kill me, you know damn well he ain't gonna let you out after you deal those thirty keys. He *owns* you now. I don't know what you gonna do, young blood."

"What *you* gonna do?" Priest's concern was genuine.

"Run. All I *can* do. You give me some money?" Scatter had regained his cool.

"I got about twenty thousand up at Georgia's. I'll give you that," Priest promised. "When you get somewhere, let me know and I'll get you whatever you need."

"I need the twenty tonight. Meet me at the East Side Air Terminal at two." Scatter turned to go, then stopped, remembering something. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope, a large manila envelope with nothing written on the outside. He held it out to Priest, who took it.

"This is all about the man. His name is Deputy Commissioner Riordan. It's all here, including his pictures. You should know who he is. I even got some shit in there about his folks."

As the envelope changed hands, a long, sad look passed between the older man and the younger. They slapped their palms together softly, barely touching, and then Scatter was out the door and gone.

Scatter walked down the deserted Park Avenue street toward his Rolls-Royce, parked on the next block. He did not see the two men waiting just around the corner for him to pass. As he reached the corner, O'Rourke and Young were on him. Young twisted the old man's arm and

held him helpless while O'Rourke frisked him and took his gun.

"Scatter, the Skipper wants to see you." Young's voice was firm, although he did not meet the black man's eye.

"Not now, man, I'm busy." Scatter tried to sound cool.

"Let's go." O'Rourke never wasted words.

They headed toward the Rolls, where Regan stood waiting. The detective opened the car door and the other two pushed Scatter inside and flanked him on the back seat. Regan got behind the wheel. The large, dignified car cruised westward through the dark wintry streets until it reached a deserted area under the West Side Highway, a haunt of water rats and tons of garbage and junked cars. In a totally deserted spot, the car stopped. Regan switched off the headlights.

In the back seat, O'Rourke and Young began forcing Scatter out of his overcoat. The old man struggled, pleading for his life.

"Look, I'm pickin' up twenty thousand tonight. It's yours."

Nobody answered. The detectives in the back seat were busy pushing up Scatter's jacket sleeve. Young held a hypodermic needle ready. When Scatter saw the hot shot and knew how he was to

die, his courage failed utterly. With tears in his eyes, he began to beg.

"Oh, my God, *please* mister, don't kill me. Please don't kill me . . ."

Without a word, Young plunged the needle into Scatter's arm, expertly finding the vein. Scatter's eyes stretched to the size of half dollars as the strychnine entered his bloodstream and hit. Then his face went slack, his head dropping back to rest on the seat. A trace of a smile came to his lips, the beatific expression of the junkie on the greatest high of all. Death.

X

After Scatter split, Priest desperately tried to get his head together. He did some coke, smoked a couple of joints, and cooled out. It was important that he understand exactly what was going down, maybe the most important understanding of his life. The Man would not let Scatter go, was trying to ice him, in fact. Scatter was right, of course. The Man would never let Priest or Eddy go, either. They'd have to deal coke forever or die. He, Priest, would never get off the streets, never be able to find that freedom for himself and Georgia that had become more precious than life itself to him. And what about Scatter? If he made it safely away, The Man would know for sure who had helped him, who'd bankrolled him. Well, he'd have to deal with that later. Scatter came first; Priest's loyalties were unshakeable.

And what about Eddy? Were *his* loyalties unshakeable? How far could he trust Eddy, now that the promise of millions was dangling before his nose? Hadn't he witnessed with his own eyes Eddy's complete about-face on their plan? Could he persuade Eddy to get out of the life? Could he trust him as he used to? That was something else he'd have to deal with later, maybe even sooner than he'd planned.

The first thing he'd have to do is cool Cynthia out, make certain that she never said a word of anything she might have overheard when the Scatterman was shouting. Taking her back to bed would be the best way, giving her the jampot to keep her happy. Then he had to get over to Georgia's and get that stashed bread for Scatter, get ready to meet him at two.

But most important of all was that manila envelope. Scatter had given him a handle on The Man. Now it was up to him to figure out the best way of using it, a way that would save his ass when showdown time came as it surely would.

Priest was in Georgia's apartment counting the loot when he heard Georgia's key in the lock. He didn't look up, didn't see her standing there staring at him with a mixture of pity and fear on her beautiful face She spoke gently.

"What are you doin', baby?"

Priest didn't glance in her direction. "Not now, Georgia. Scatter needs help. I'll tell you about it later."

Georgia's eyes widened, and she stifled a small gasp of shock with her fingertips. Very softly, with tears in her eyes, she said, "Scatter's dead. I thought you knew."

Priest didn't utter a sound, but the light went out of his eyes. The hand holding the money dropped to the table, the bills spilled out over the table and the floor, unregarded. He turned to Georgia, his eyes scanning her face. He couldn't speak. Shock and sorrow pumped through his veins instead of blood and his heart felt as if an ice hand were clutching it.

"Priest, I'm afraid that's gonna happen to you."

Georgia's words acted like a tonic on the dealer. He pulled himself together, his back stiffening and the blood coming back into his cheeks. His lips set firm like a bar of iron, he said gruffly, "Don't worry, baby, I ain't Scatter."

Georgia started to speak but thought better of it. With a long, pleading, loving look at Priest, she left the room, sensing that he needed to be alone. Priest stood up and removed his hat and coat, tossing them on a nearby chair. Then he sat down again, his feet stretched out on the table, his eyes blank. He stared ahead of him, seeing nothing,

his thoughts racing madly. Scatter dead. The Man had shown his hand. It was push-come-to-shove time, time to get it together. Priest took out his snuffbox and snorted twice into each nostril, letting the coke race to his brain and stimulate his central nervous system.

Then he stood up decisively, and scooped the money up off the table and the floor, running his fingers over it, smoothing the bills into one neat wad and stowing them purposefully into his wallet. He had a use for that money, even if Scatter no longer did. The dealer strode to the chest of drawers where he kept his guns stashed, opened it and looked at the weapons inside. Then he took the .25 Beretta from his jacket pocket and laid it beside the others. For the job he had to do now he needed brains, guts and cool. Not heat. For Priest had a plan, a crazy plan that just might work. If he could pull it off, brazen it out . . . He went into the bedroom to tell it to Georgia. Then he pulled on his coat, tilted his wide brim hat at a rakish angle and left the apartment.

The coffee shop was crowded but there they were, sitting at a window table. Two white men, ordinary Joes with their short hair and bulky overcoats, heavy-set faces. They could be cops, or luggage salesmen or building contractors. But

they weren't. They didn't get up when Priest joined them, didn't smile. But they listened. Listened hard as he spoke, outlining what he wanted and was willing to pay for. They listened as he passed over to them the manila envelope, then a smaller, fatter envelope. They listened with respect and attention, not speaking much, but nodding their heads to show they understood. Priest stood up, satisfied. The men remained seated, but each extended his right hand to the young black man. Priest shook hands solemnly, the straight white man's handshake, then turned and left the coffee shop. He didn't look back.

The Eldorado nosed into a parking space in front of the apartment house on 89th Street. When the garage attendant, who was lounging outside the building, looked at the dealer with a question mark on his face, Priest shook his head. He did *not* want his wheel stashed, he wanted it right where it was. Priest rode the elevator up to the 24th floor, thinking hard. He let himself in with his key.

Eddy was putting a James Brown album on the stereo when Priest came in the door with a briefcase under his arm. He put the record down and smiled at his partner. Priest strode to the window

and looked down at the view. Eddy came up to his side, touched his arm gently.

"What do you think about Scatter O.D.'in'?"

Priest didn't look around. "Scatter didn't O.D., somebody killed him."

"Who do you think did it?" Priest could hear the probing note in Eddy's voice.

"A lot of people hated Scatter." He wasn't giving away anything. Not for free. He strolled to the couch and sat down, elaborately casual. Lighting a joint he'd picked up from the coffee table, he asked Eddy, "How much we got left, man?"

"Bout half a key out workin'. Out in the street."

"Let's give it up and split with what we got now."

Eddy flared up, falling into the trap that Priest had set for him.

"Are you crazy! You know damn well who killed Scatter. And if we fuck with 'em they'll kill us, too. Besides, we got it dicked, we can make a fortune! Don't rock the boat, man!" Now Priest knew where Eddy's head was at. But he tried once more, for old times' sake, to bring his friend around.

"It's worse now than it was before. The Man owns us, you understand that, Eddy? To him

we're not real. He just uses us up and then he'll kill us."

Eddy's chin came up and his eyes glittered. "Well, people been usin' me all my life. Yeah, this honkey's usin' me. So what? I'm *glad* he's usin' me. 'Cause I'm gonna make a shit load o' money. I'm gonna live like a prince, a fuckin' black prince. This is the life. I can't be somebody, anywhere else. And, as for him killin' me, I don't care, as long as he waits 'til I'm one old mother fucker. I ain't gonna piss around and have him kill me now."

Priest squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and asked the last question, the only important one.

"Suppose I had a way for us to get out?"

"I ain't goin'."

And there it was. Push come to shove. Time for Priest to make his move. He looked long and hard at Eddy. They'd been friends for years, had come up from the streets together, kicked ass for each other, taken their knocks side by side. They'd balled the same chicks, smoked the same dope, shared the same life. There was a time they would have killed for each other, maybe even died for each other. Now it was over. Priest looked at Eddy's defiant face, at the stubborn set of his chin, the greedy curve to his mouth, and

knew he was looking at a stranger. He took up the briefcase and handed it to Eddy.

"Fill it."

Eddy's eyes narrowed. "Why don't you do it yourself?"

Laying it all out for Eddy to know. "Because I want to see you every minute."

Eddy glared at Priest; he was very angry. But he took the briefcase from the other man's hand. He could tell from the look on Priest's face that the man was deadly serious, that he would kill if he had to. He walked to the front closet and knelt down, pushing clothes out of the way. On the back wall of the closet was a safe. Priest stood in the doorway, watching, his eyes never for one instant leaving Eddy.

The safe was open now. It was stuffed with packages of bills, thick bundles held together by fat rubber bands. Mostly twenties and fifties. Priest watched quietly as Eddy began to stuff bundles of money into the briefcase. As the smaller man worked and the safe began to empty, Eddy packed more and more slowly and reluctantly. But at last the briefcase was full. He handed it up to Priest, who took it and zipped it shut.

Priest let himself out the front door without a

goodbye. He felt rather than saw Eddy's furious stare at his receding back. The door slammed.

Priest paused for a moment outside the front door of the apartment, listening hard. He could hear the telephone dial turning, hear the low urgency of Eddy's voice. But he couldn't make out the words. With a pounding heart, Priest walked swiftly down the hallway to the elevator and pressed the button.

XI

Inside the apartment, Eddy was on the phone. He had dialed that special number, the one Storz had given him. Now he had Storz on the phone and he was shit scared.

"I didn't know! I'm callin' you, ain't I? He just left the apartment."

Downtown, Storz leaped into action. "Hold on," he instructed Eddy. Calling Regan, Young and O'Rourke into his office, he flipped the switch on his intercom and barked into it.

"Yes, sir," came the disembodied voice from the box on Storz's desk.

"Get me the Chief of Detectives at the 51st Precinct, on line two." Then he turned back to the phone where Eddy was waiting on the line. Impatiently, he snarled into the receiver, "Does he have all his money with him? What's it in? O.K. . . ." As the other phone on his desk began

to ring, Storz abruptly hung up on Eddy and picked up line two. He spoke rapidly. "Lou, do me a favor. Send out a car and pick me up a guy right now at . . ." He gave the Chief of Detectives Priest's address and description and hung up. Then he turned to his three men. "You know what to do?" They nodded. They knew what to do.

Priest drummed his fingers nervously on the elevator button. Would the damn thing never come? When it arrived, he stepped in quickly, anxiously waiting for the door to close. The elevator started up, dropped a couple of floors, then stopped. The door slid open. A black cleaning woman, her head wrapped in a large cotton scarf that partly obscured her face, came slowly into the car. She carried a large shopping bag, overflowing with old clothes. Priest pressed the button for the street floor. As the car dropped, he reached quickly into the woman's shopping bag, tossing the clothes aside and pulling out a black briefcase identical to the one he was carrying. Then he pushed his own case, filled with hundreds of thousands of dollars, deep into the shopping bag and piled the clothes back on top to conceal it. He tucked the second case under his arm and turned to smile at the dowdy cleaning

woman. It was Georgia, her trim figure hidden by a bulky shapeless old coat, her long hair and lovely face undetectable under the scarf. The elevator stopped at the ground floor and the two got out, not speaking or looking at each other, heading off in different directions.

As Priest reached the Eldorado and put his hand on the door, a police car came roaring up 89th Street, sirens screaming. Two cops left it on the run, their guns drawn. They slammed the dealer up against the car. Out of the corner of his eye, Priest could see Georgia shuffling slowly away with the shopping bag, an old colored maid whom nobody would look at twice.

"Turn around, and put your hands on the roof of the car, palms down," one of the patrolmen snarled. Priest obeyed. The second officer moved up behind the dealer, kicking his feet apart so that Priest was forced to spread eagle. Then he frisked him, thoroughly and roughly, finding nothing. Priest swallowed a small smile.

"He's clean. Call the station."

The first patrolman climbed back into the front seat of the police car and picked up his two-way radio.

"Ten four. Yeah. Car 42, Patrolman Barron, 51st precinct. 15-81 special call. Picked up black male in black Eldorado, license number T33 dash

4, New York plates. Holding as instructed . . . Over."

"O.K. Car 42 stand by." The voice squawked out of the box.

Storz and his men were relaxing in his office, confident that Priest could not escape. The intercom buzzed, and the inspector leaned forward and flipped the switch.

"Yes."

The voice came out clear from the box on the desk. "Your suspect has been apprehended, Captain, at 89th and Second by two patrolmen from the 51st precinct. Being held for your instructions."

Storz snapped his fingers at Young, Regan and O'Rourke, and they got to their feet, pulling on their jackets and checking their guns. A nod of the inspector's head told them that they had better get going to that location on the double. When they'd left, Storz spoke into the intercom microphone.

"Three detectives from my office are on their way to take custody. Have the patrolmen release the suspect to them." Then he sat back, satisfied. Priest was trapped. It was all over. He'd never liked that uppity nigger anyhow. Now, Eddy was somebody they could do business with . . .

When the unmarked detectives' car pulled up beside the patrol car, Priest felt a surge of fear in his gut. This was it. The Man had come to get him. He let nothing show on his face, but his hands tightened on the roof of the car. He could see the detectives talking to the patrolmen, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. He could guess, though. Two of the detectives came to get him, pushing him roughly in the direction of their car. The third checked out the Eldorado, making sure the briefcase was safely on the front seat. Then he climbed in behind the wheel of Priest's car while the other two shoved Priest into the unmarked police car. Both cars drove off together.

The west side dock was long abandoned, crumbling to pieces. Nobody but seagulls and rats used it now. As the two cars pulled onto the landing, Priest could see a tall, overcoated man, his thin nose red with cold, standing by an expensive black sedan, the kind the city provides to its top officials.

The three detectives piled out, Regan and Young dragging Priest out of their car. O'Rourke pulled the briefcase out of the Eldorado and set it on the hood of the city limousine. Then all four white men surrounded Priest, backing Priest up against the fence that bordered the dock. The de-

tectives remained silent, but the older man spoke.

"So you're Priest. I thought you'd be my best man. A good organizer, take proper control of your money. You're makin' more money than you ever made in your goddam life and you want to *quit*. To do what? You got an arrest record going back to when you were twelve years old. What else can you do? You just wanta be another dumb nigger."

He waited for an answer, but Priest just glared at him, sending out waves of hatred. His back was against the fence, nothing but garbage cans at his side, and four armed pigs in front of him, but somehow Priest felt no fear. He got out his stash and snorted some coke, feeling the rush of power into his arms and legs.

"Fuck it," The Man snarled. "I don't give a shit what's in your head. You work for me, nigger, and you'll work for me until I say you don't."

"You don't own me, pig, and no mother fucker's gonna tell me when I can split." Priest's eyes were slits of contempt.

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to, nigger?" The veins in The Man's forehead stood out purple.

"You, you redneck faggot."

Choking with rage, The Man signaled to the three detectives. They moved in for the kill.

O'Rourke caught Priest on the side of the head with a vicious punch, stunning him and sending him backward against the fence. Priest shook his head to clear it, just as Regan and Young were upon him. Kicking out his left leg as his karate master had taught him, Priest hooked his toes around the back of Regan's knee, bringing him crashing to the ground. Fending Young off for the moment with a vicious elbow jab, he kicked Regan savagely and swiftly, in the gut, in the kidneys and a chopping kick to the head. Regan groaned and lay still.

But now O'Rourke had joined Young and the two were punishing Priest badly with vicious punches of their trained, beefy fists. Groggy, Priest nevertheless managed to pull away, dancing and weaving, his feet executing the neat steps of the karate adept. When he got a fair distance from Young, Priest kicked out with his leg straight, hard, catching Young full on the chin and sending him staggering. Then, swift as lightning, he had grabbed up the lid of one of the nearby garbage cans, and sent it slamming into O'Rourke's stomach, bending him over. Priest karate-chopped the doubled-up cop on the back of his neck, and the fight was suddenly over for O'Rourke. The blood swam in Priest's head, his breathing came in long, shuddering gasps. Look-

ing up just in time, he saw Young, roaring like a bull, rushing forward for the kill. Priest swung the garbage can lid hard, with all the strength of his muscular young arms, and Young received it full in the face. Blood gushed immediately from the beefy detective's mouth and nose and with a groan he staggered backward, fell, and lay still. Priest stood like a black warrior among his vanquished foes, his hands still clenched into fists, his shoulders heaving, triumph mixing with the adrenalin that still coursed through his veins.

"Freeze." The voice cut through the cold like a serrated knife. Priest turned to see The Man, hatred in his face and a .38 Police Special in his hand.

Triumph turned to rage. The very hairs of Priest's mustache seemed to stand up and bristle with pure anger.

"Kill me! Kill me like you killed Scatter, *Riordan*, and you are one dead pig."

"What did you call me?" There was an unmistakable note of panic in the white man's voice.

"*Deputy Commissioner Riordan.*" Priest spat the name out as though it were too dirty to remain in his mouth. "That's right, I know your name. I know all about you. I know about your wife, that big legged daughter of yours . . ."

Priest's lips stretched in an evil grin . . . "and that faggot son."

Riordan froze in shock and fury. He cocked the hammer back on the gun, ready to shoot.

"Do it, Captain!" Priest urged. "I ain't afraid to die, but kill me and you and your whole fuckin' family die."

"That's bullshit!"

Priest grinned widely, looking Riordan straight in the eye. "I ain't bullshittin', Captain. I got a one hundred thousand dollar contract on your life, your wife, your daughter and even your son." He laughed. "Yeah, if I choke on a chicken bone, all the Riordans is dead."

Riordan stood speechless for a moment, wavering. Then he remembered Priest's briefcase, in his custody. His laugh sounded more like a snarl.

"You ain't got $100,000 for a contract, nigger!"

By now Regan had regained his feet, and Riordan motioned to him. Regan walked slowly to the Commissioner's car and opened the briefcase on the hood. As he zipped it open, a pile of shirts and socks was revealed. Priest stood savoring the look on Riordan's face. The high color in his cheeks drained away, leaving the skin gray and the nose pinched. Suddenly, the man looked old, very, very old.

"You offering to do my dirty laundry?" Priest asked with raised eyebrow.

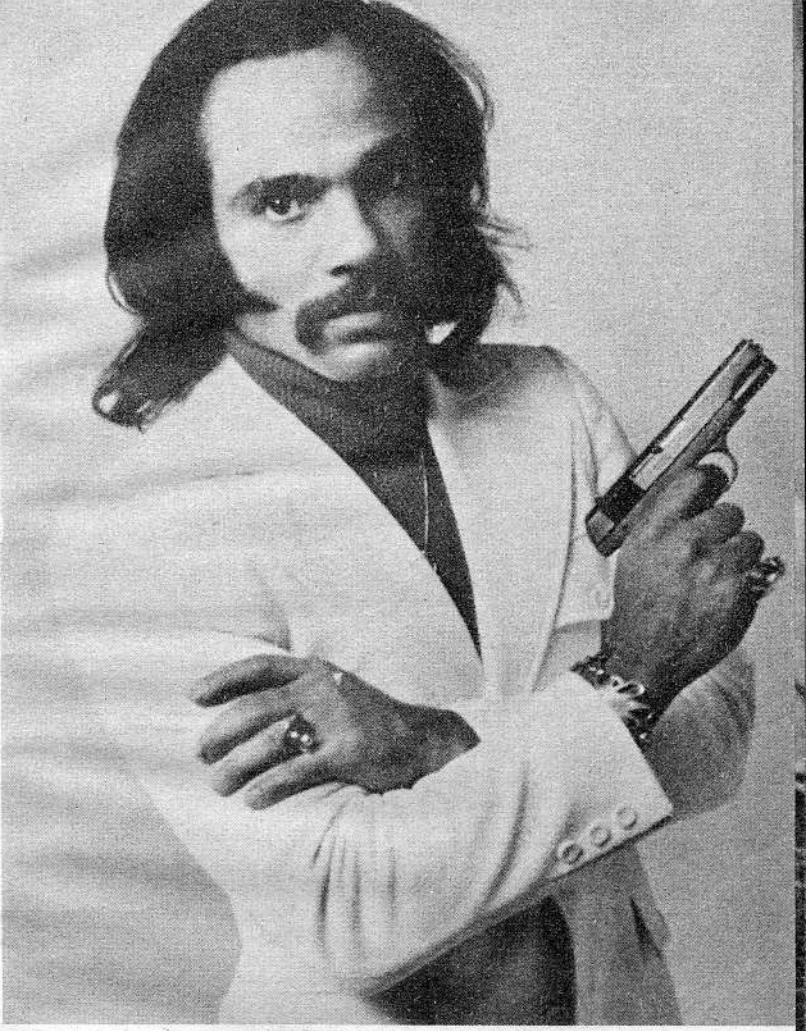
Slowly, the Commissioner's gun began to lower, until it dangled limply from his wrist. Defeated. His game played out. Bested by a nigger.

Now Priest was all seriousness, intent on driving his point home.

"I hired the best killers there are. *White* killers. So remember, there ain't enough honky pig partners you got to protect your ass, so take real good care of mine. Yeah, if one hair on my gorgeous head is harmed, it's all over for you, mother fucker!"

He turned his back deliberately and walked off, not deigning to look behind him. He knew where it was at. He knew the Commissioner's mind was blown, that all he could think of was the button men out there somewhere, waiting. Arrogantly, Priest climbed into the front seat of his Eldorado and gunned the motor, making a getaway at seventy miles an hour. Driving off to where Georgia waited with a body full of love and half a million dollars in cash.

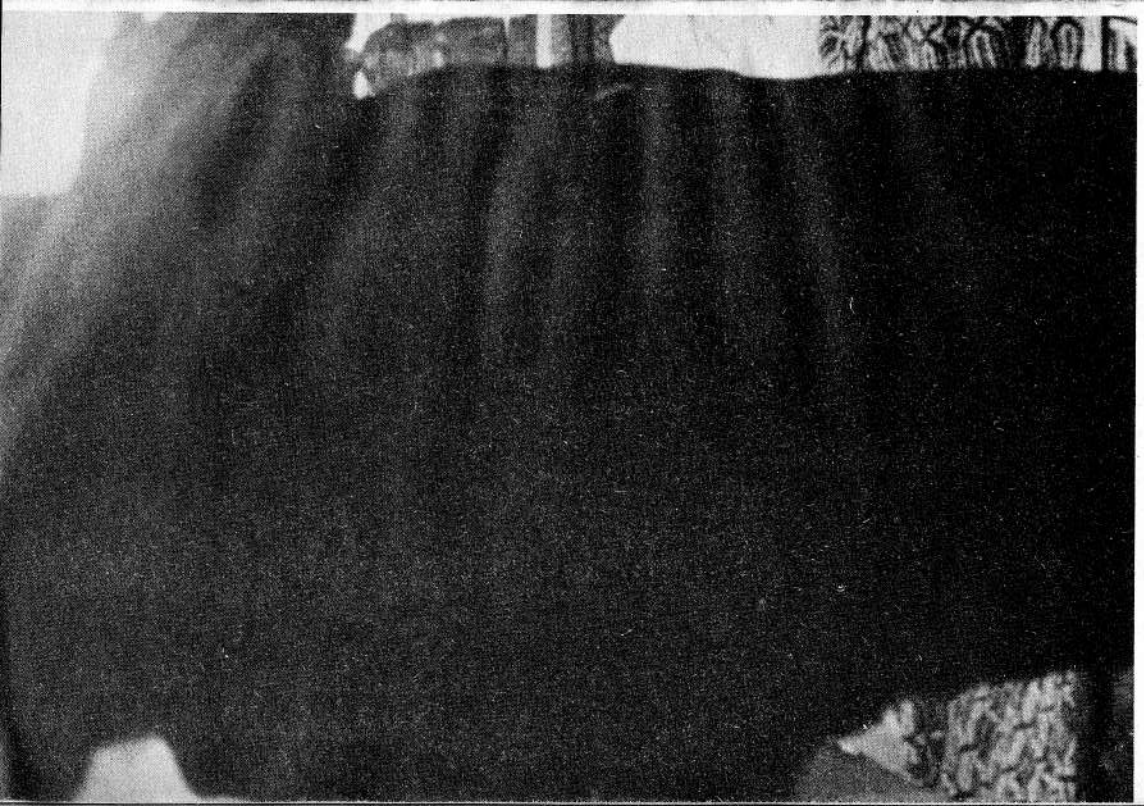
END



RON O'NEAL as PRIEST

"The game he plays he plays for keeps
Hustling times in ghetto streets
Tryin' to get over, that's what he's tryin' to do, you-all
Taking all that he can take,
Gamblin' with the odds of fate. . . ."

words and music by Curtis Mayfield © Curtom Publishing Co., Inc.



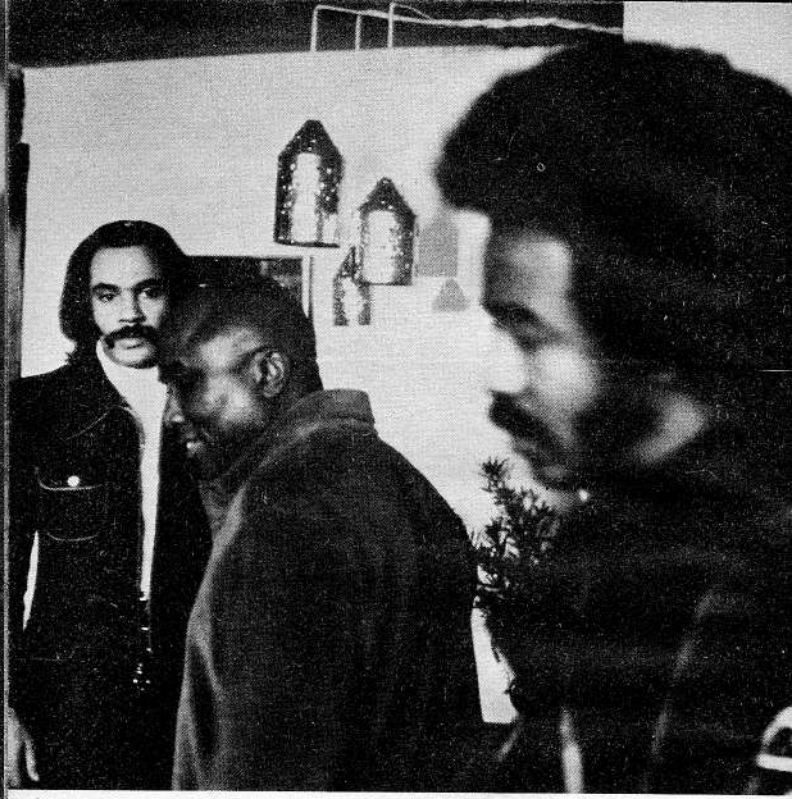
CYNTHIA: Are you coming back SOON?

A lot of women asked Priest that question, but never got an answer.

PRIEST hurtles through the ghetto after the junkie who ripped him off.

JUDD: Try some of this superfly coke.

PRIEST: Never say no. Don't drop it.



PRIEST: Don't argue. I'm givin' you a chance! You don't get my money *tonight*, I'm gonna put that young girl of yours out on Whore's Row and let her get my money on her back!

SHEILA FRAZIER as GEORGIA

GEORGIA: Why do you need the money so much, Priest? Maybe you should get out now, before something really bad happens. I could be happy with a plain life, a poor life, even . . .

CARL LEE as EDDY

EDDY: What do you mean I can't six? These two sisters do what I want . . . I'm the dude they out here workin' for . . .

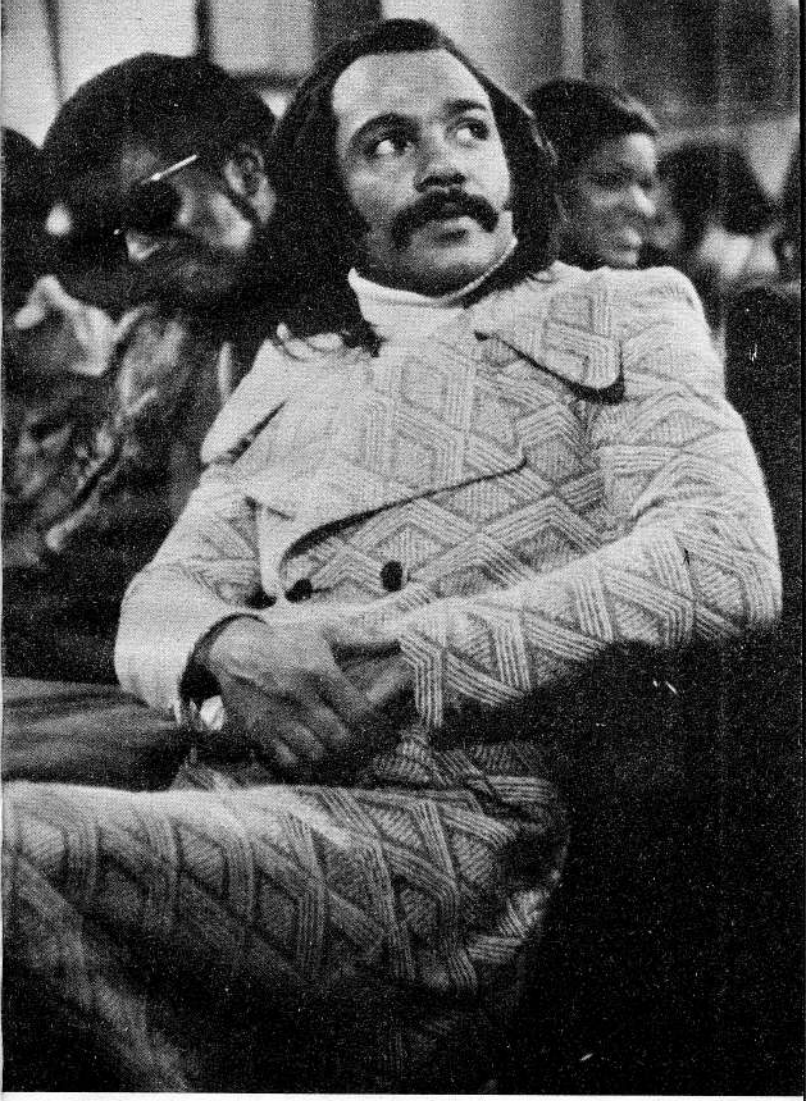
PRIEST: We're gonna take the three hundred thousand and buy thirty keys. The best shit in town, man. We can turn it over in like I said just four months. And baby, we off the street for food with a million cash!

EDDY: How long this been in your head? Man, you don't do nothin' overnight. Why didn't you tell me? I'm supposed to be your partner.

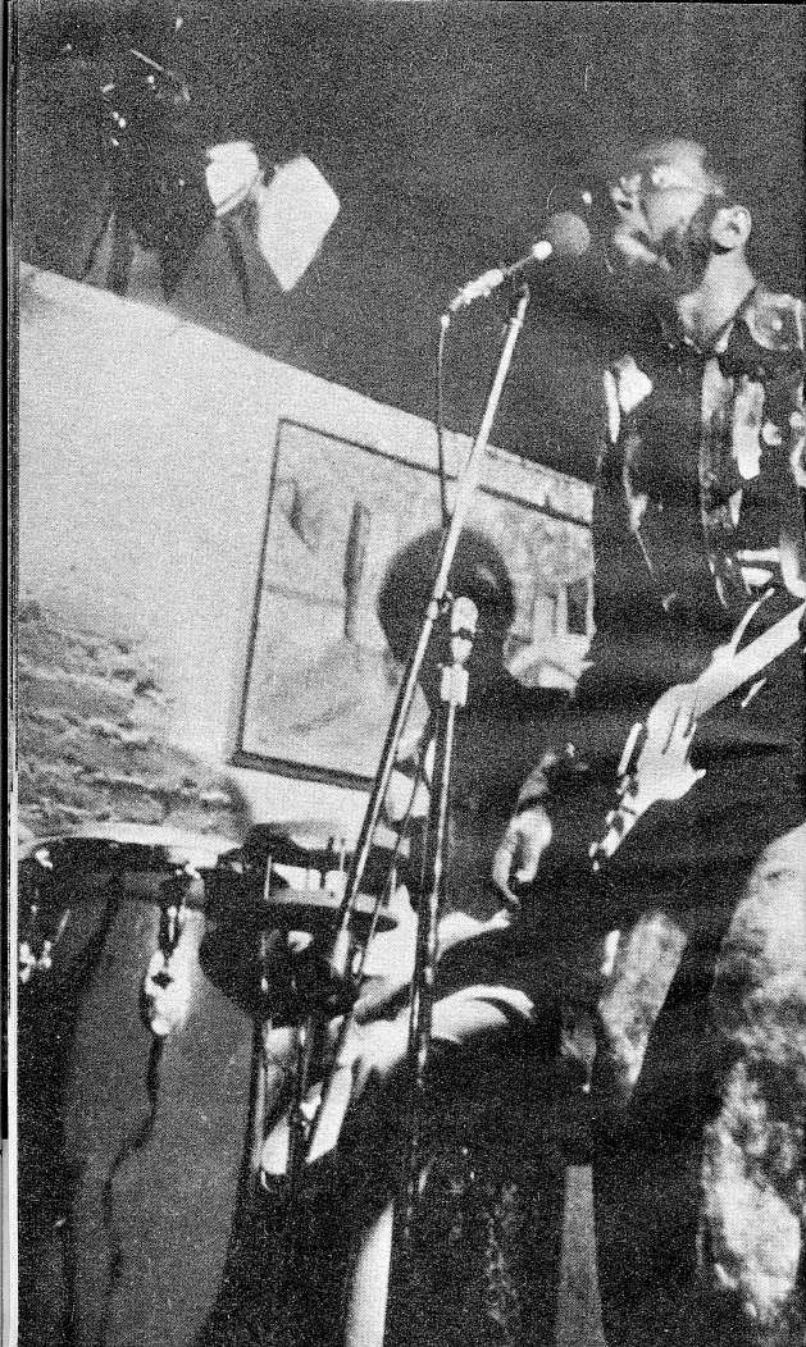
FREDDY: Gimme the money, man.

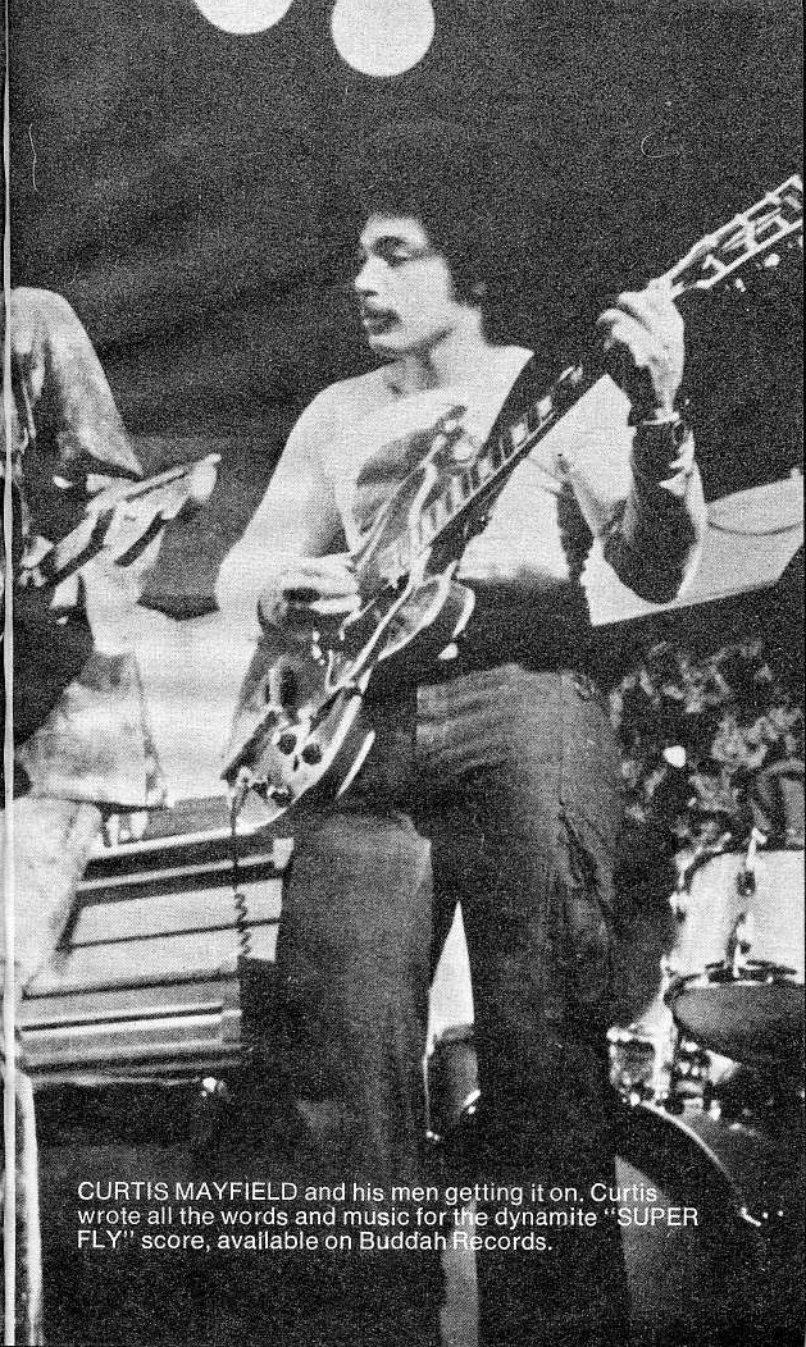
MAN: What money? I ain't got no money?

FREDDY: Don't give me that shit. Where's the other one? All you wops carry two rolls.

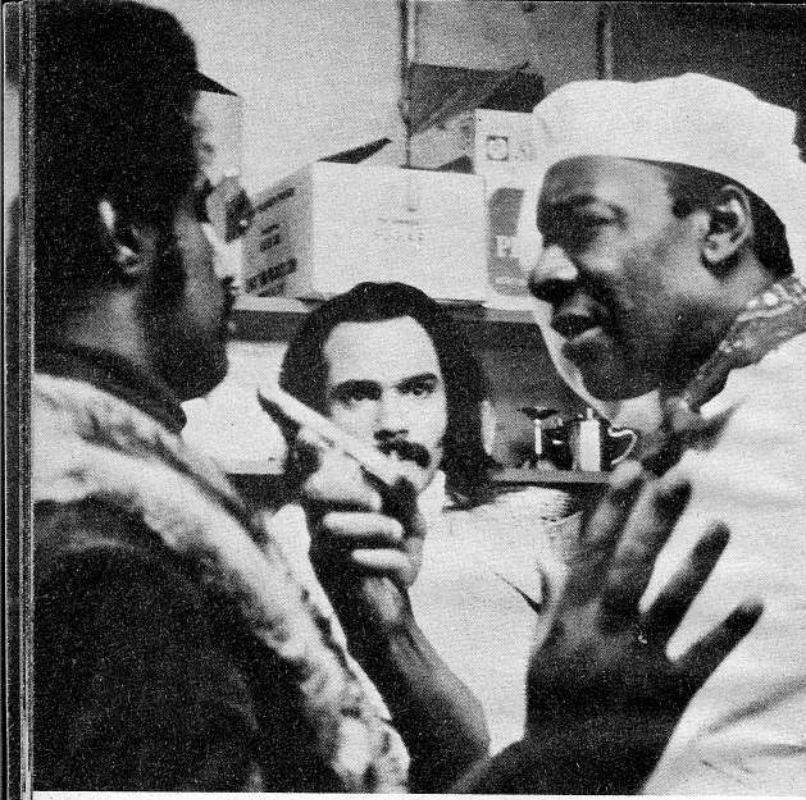


PRIEST digging Curtis Mayfield and his band at Scatter's place.





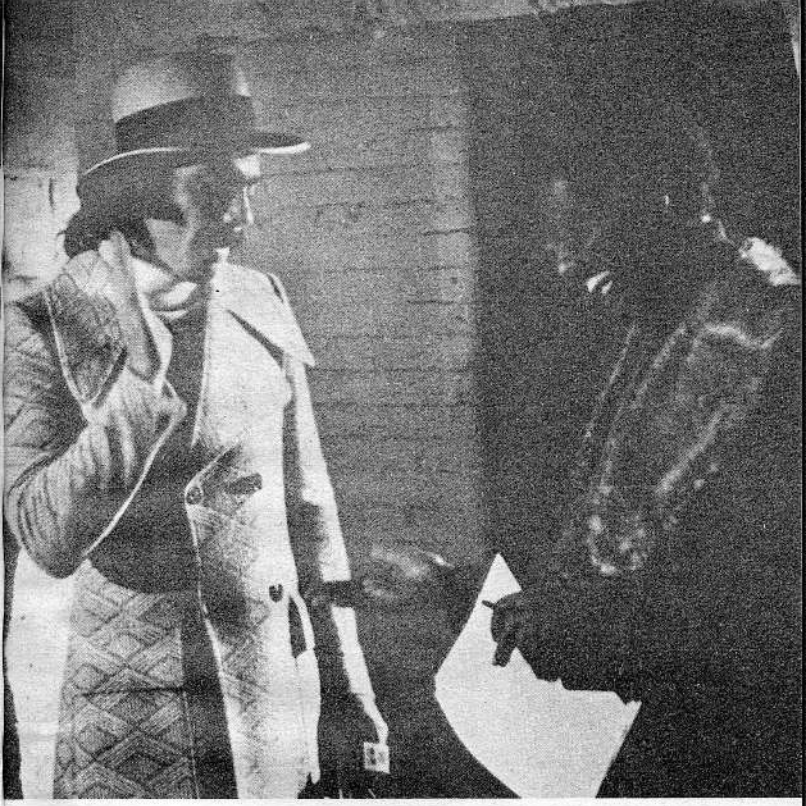
CURTIS MAYFIELD and his men getting it on. Curtis wrote all the words and music for the dynamite "SUPER FLY" score, available on Buddah Records.



JULIUS W. HARRIS as SCATTER

SCATTER: You don't tell me what to do! Dis Scatter you talkin' to! Dis the Scatter man." I'll kill this nigger o' yours!

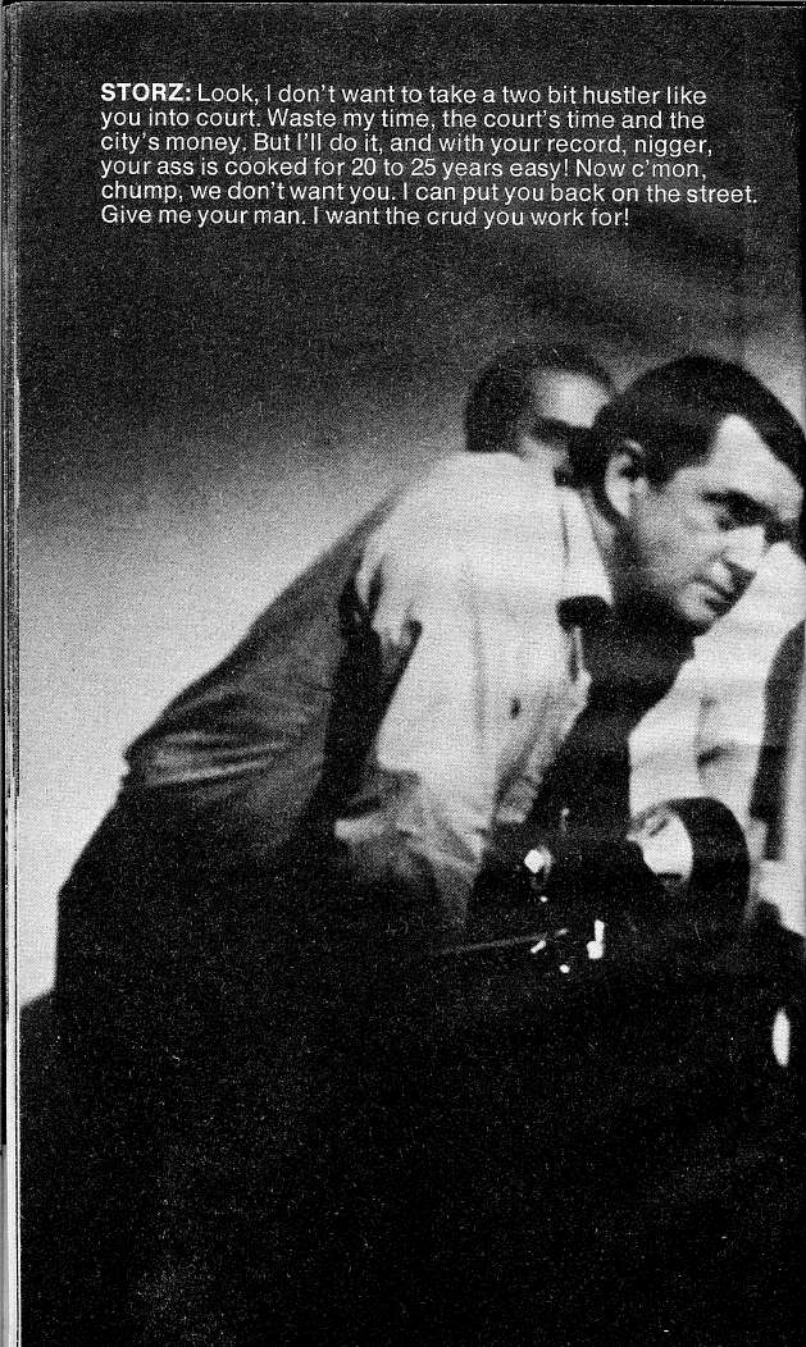
PRIEST: Scatter, don't kill him, please! We just tryin' to get out. You know what it means, man. Please, I'm sorry.



PRIEST: Hey, man, that was quite a number you pulled.

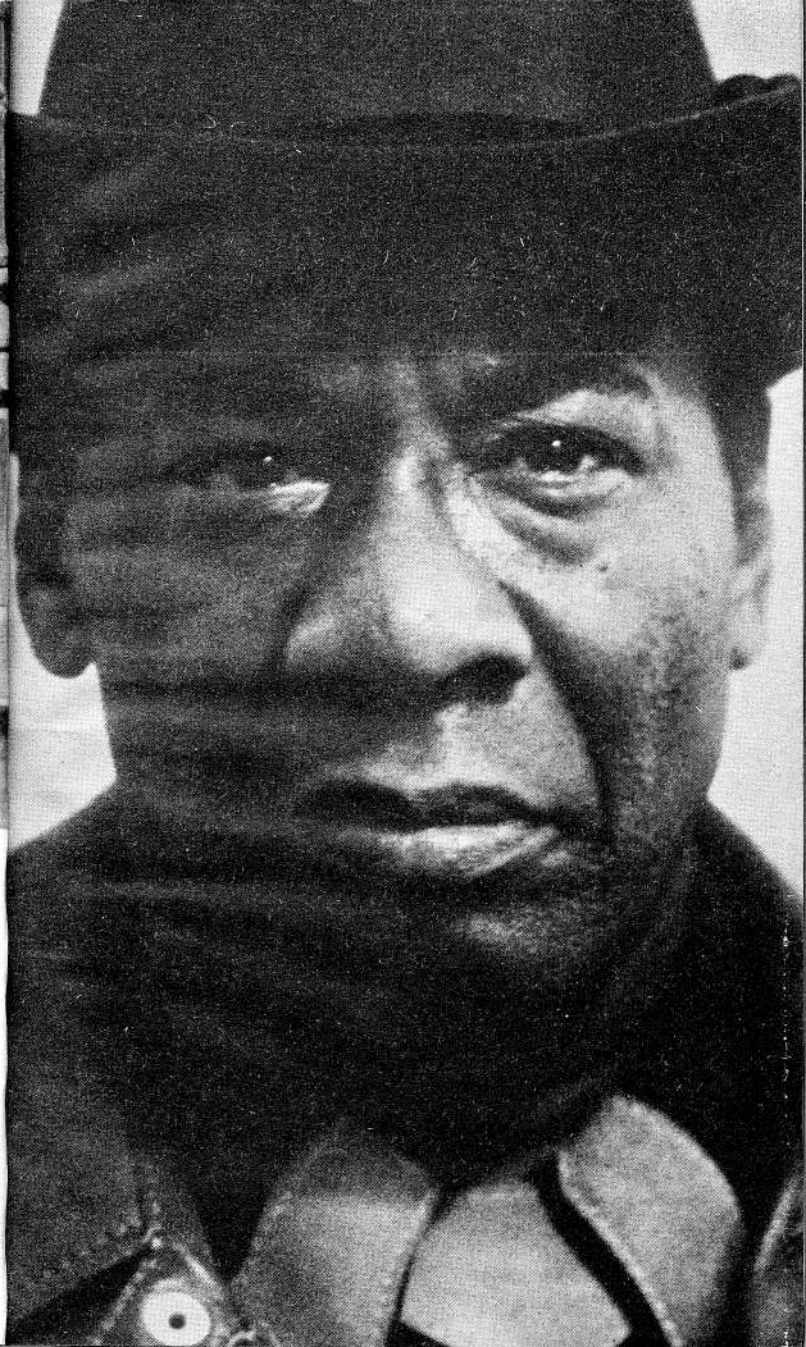
EDDY: Come on, nigger, you know damn well I knew what I was doin'.

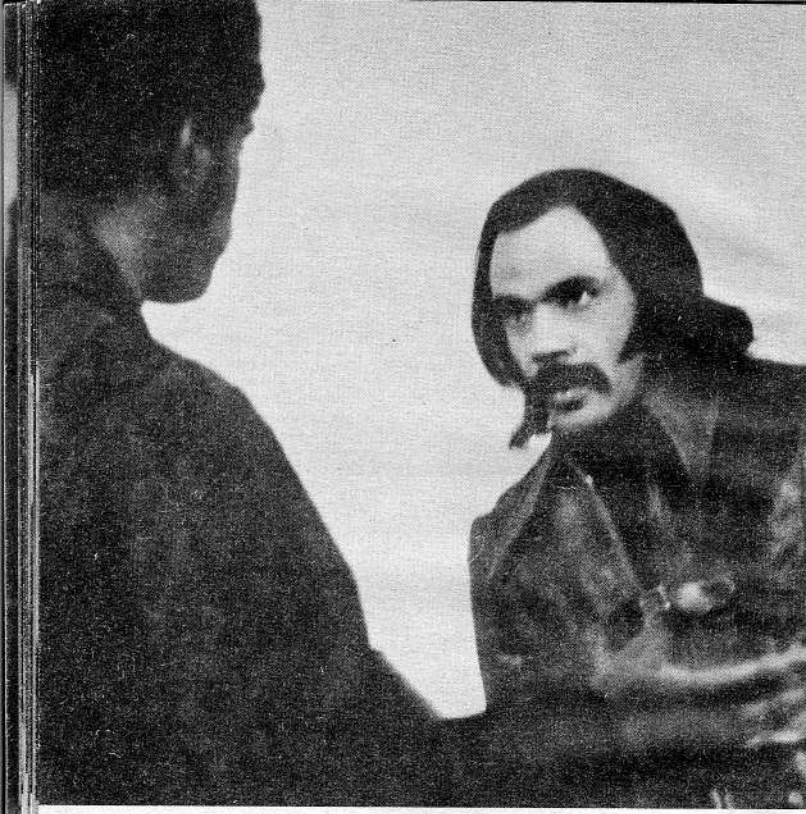
STORZ: Look, I don't want to take a two bit hustler like you into court. Waste my time, the court's time and the city's money. But I'll do it, and with your record, nigger, your ass is cooked for 20 to 25 years easy! Now c'mon, chump, we don't want you. I can put you back on the street. Give me your man. I want the crud you work for!



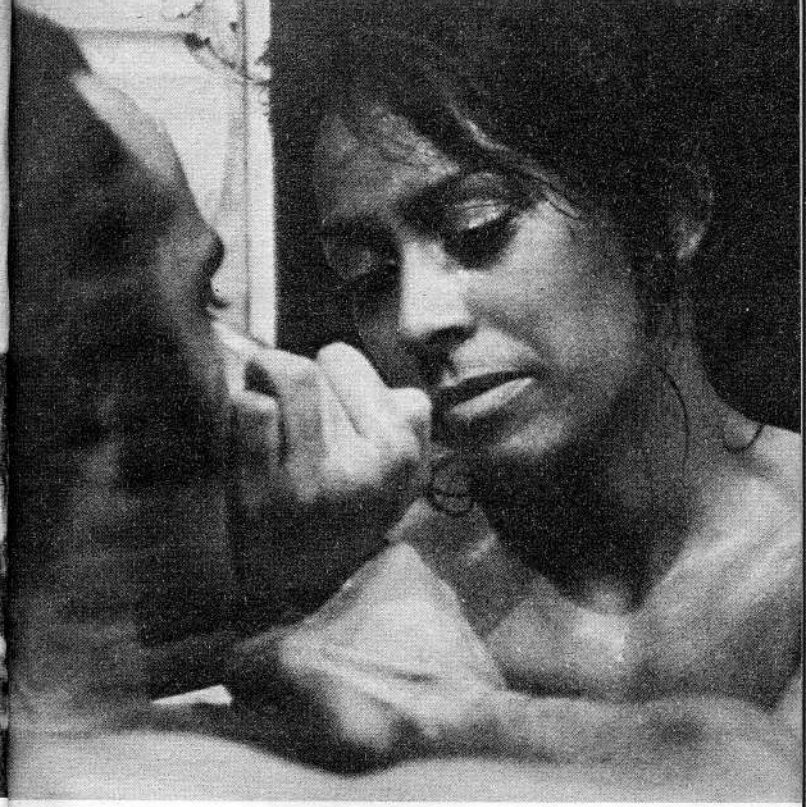
The detectives hustle Fat Freddy out of the precinct house after he has betrayed Priest and has been betrayed in his turn by the police.

The Scatterman, a man of respect in Harlem and former dealer of the superfly cocaine.





PRIEST: It's worse now than it was before. The Man owns us, you understand that, Eddy. To him we're not real. He just uses us up and then he'll kill us.



GEORGIA: Listen, Priest, I know how you feel some time when you come in here. I can feel from you what it's like out there. I see what it does to you, and I know how dope helps hold your head together. I don't want your privacy, baby. I just want to share the weight.

PRIEST, trained in karate, delivers a few surprises to three detectives at once in the smashing and thrilling climax to "SUPER FLY."

GORDON PARKS, JR., 37-year-old director of "SUPER FLY."

About the PEOPLE Who Made "SUPER FLY"

RON O'NEAL (*Priest*)

Ron O'Neal, in 1970, had to make a choice that faces nearly all artists of every kind at some point: whether to go for the money, or for what might satisfy the soul. Like some before him, O'Neal chose the latter. Unlike most, he emerged a winner. A star with a better-than-ever chance at the money.

The need to choose came when O'Neal was offered a job paying $112.50 a week to appear on Broadway in "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men." The sum of $112.50 a week was pretty big to O'Neal. Only a few years earlier he had had to house-paint at $12 a day—when he could get the work—so that he might continue to study acting.

But he was also offered a chance to play a major character in a workshop production at Joseph Papp's public theatre in Greenwich

Village. The play was called "No Place to Be Somebody." O'Neal had read the play and been smitten by it. Even more, he was mesmerized by the author, Charles Gordone. This man, O'Neal says, "knows more about acting and theatre than anyone I ever met. He understands what I call 'magic' . . . he has the power to make actors achieve." Between the lure of Gordone and the pull of the play, O'Neal chose them over money.

"No Place to Be Somebody" won the 1971 Pulitzer Prize for playwrighting, and O'Neal carried off the Obie Award, the Clarence Derwent Award, the Theatre Award and the Drama Desk Award for acting.

Wreathed in triumph, O'Neal was summoned by Hollywood, first for a small part in an Elliot Gould film called "Move," then for a guest star role in "The Internes," next for a sizeable role in Sidney Poitiers' "The Organization." At first, acting for the camera instead of an audience baffled and bothered him, but with each film he mellowed in attitude and modified in technique. He was ready when a long-time Cleveland friend, Phillip Fenty, offered him the lead in a knife-edged drama of Harlem today.

The film, a Sig Shore Production for Warner Bros., directed by Gordon Parks Jr., is called

"Super Fly" and should make O'Neal one of the most important black actors in America.

Existence for Ron O'Neal was not always an upward spiral. His father was a jazzman who had to work in a factory because jobs at music were few. Ron enrolled at Ohio State but had no study aims. In his own words, he "just played bridge" at school. Like too many of his peers he was affected by the malaise of the black ghetto—what was the use if you wouldn't get anywhere anyway?

A performance of "Finian's Rainbow" he saw changed his destiny. "I fell in love with the theatre," he says. He took himself to Karamu, an unique inter-racial organization founded in 1913 by two prescient blacks, Russell and Rowena Jeliffe. "Karamu" in Swahili means "place of enjoyment." Originally a store in the ghetto, over which the Jeliffes lived, Karamu eventually grew equal in eminence to the Cleveland Playhouse. O'Neal stayed at Karamu eight years, obtained a thorough grounding in the classics, such as the plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Shakespeare. He learned not only the art of acting but also the kindred arts of dancing and singing. He appeared as Petrucchio in "Kiss Me, Kate," Jerry in "The Zoo Story" and Stanley Kowalski in "A Streetcar Named Desire," and feels today that a black

skin is no hindrance, or one that quickly vanishes, to portrayal of a "white" character.

Eventually, he left the Karamu nest for a try at New York, came to Harlem to teach acting to teenagers and young adults under the auspices of Haryou-Act. His troupe performed in schools, settlement houses and even prisons. The occupants of the latter, he found, were splendid audiences.

After a couple of years of teaching, O'Neal took a job as singer-and-driver-of-stationwagon with a touring company of black singers in something called "The Best of Broadway." Then, to obtain his membership in Actors Equity, he found a small part in a road company of "Showboat." His first true acting role in "American Pastorale" won him good personal notices though the play closed quickly. Next, O'Neal was invited to work in a workshop production at the Papp Theatre. What he showed there earned him a bid to go into "No Place to Be Somebody."

Now in his mid-thirties, O'Neal found "Super Fly" the challenge of his life. His was the task of making the central character, Priest—a dealer in cocaine and marijuana—sympathetic and not merely true. And also to convey the inner meaning of the character: that even a successful dealer who has made a "score" does not really

escape the clutch of a civilization ruled by whites. O'Neal thinks he has succeeded, hopes he has succeeded, wants to have succeeded. Not only for himself as a star, but also for his people.

CARL LEE (*Eddy*)

Starting at the top can be gravely difficult, Carl Lee, as the son of the dominant black theatrical star of the forties, Canada Lee, had an acting career virtually assured from birth. But that, inevitably, put him up against a question: how would he measure up to the image of achievement left by his father?

It has taken Carl Lee about 20 years to find his own stride, form his own style, shape his own image. A big new role in "Superfly," the bitter and incisive drama about the black ghetto, should propel him further into establishing Carl Lee, in his own right, as a star-personality of stature. The film is a Sig Shore Production for Warner Bros., directed by Gordon Parks Jr.

As a child, Carl never lived in any of New York's black ghettoes, yet he endured rejection and isolation. In his own words, "a double isola-

tion." Being black in neighborhoods generally white, he was isolated for that. And being the son of the most eminent black actor of the time, there was no other kid of similar antecedents to pal around with. "In Hollywood, at least," he now says, "the children of the stars had each other. Here in New York there wasn't anybody."

Being who he was, he had swift and easy access to the finest acting teachers of the period—Sanford Meisner, Paul Mann, Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky. After seven years of study, young Carl made his acting debut in Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Respectful Prostitute," in which he toured the New York City area. His second vehicle was "Deep Are the Roots," in which he toured a few American cities. The third proved a rankling, corrosive experience. He was the sole black performer in a road company of "No Time For Sergeants." It played various towns and ran in Chicago over a year. In this show, among his fellow players, probably for the first time in his life, Lee encountered the full blow of ostracism for reasons of color. He who had never lived in ghettoes began to frequent black areas for fellowship and solace.

Returning to New York, he joined The Living Theatre, an avant garde group which was ex-

ploring ways to open the stage as a medium of expression. He joined the cast of a protest play called "The Connection," the first successful American drama about narcotics and addicts. When a new company was formed to tour Europe, Lee went into it. Later a film version was done by Shirley Clarke, an experimental film-maker.

Lee collaborated with Miss Clarke on the script of another movie on the subject of narcotics, "The Cool World," functioned as casting director and played the lead. This was the first film production to go into Harlem, to use actual locations and local people, and to recruit young blacks to train in the technical aspects of movie-making. "The Cool World" failed financially but has become a classic for serious students of film. "We were ahead of our time," says Lee.

The next move was television. Lee appeared in a segment of "The Nurses" series and was nominated for an Emmy. He veered off into different acting form, readings from the works of Sholom Alecheim with Howard Da Silva and Morris Carnovsky, then did a brief role in a film, "A Man Called Adam." He returned to the stage in a touring production of "The Odd Couple" and a

Yale University production of Jules Pfeiffer's comedy called "God Bless."

Then he appeared in a Robert Downey film, "Pound," and Joseph Papp's production of "Black Hamlet," which showed in the parks and playgrounds of New York City. Lee joined the Negro Ensemble Theatre and was cast in the group's first big hit, "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men." The play won a New Dramatists Award and for Lee was a turning point. "Suddenly everything fell into place. I found the control I always needed, and became an actor," he says. Until then, he feels, he had been mostly the son of Canada Lee.

Having worked both before the camera and on the stage, Lee is more comfortable in and prefers motion picture acting. The short bursts of performance in which "you give it a shove, get it on, then drop it" suit his temperament better than the sustained effort involved in a stage portrayal.

Carl Lee is convinced an actor now is not what an actor once was. Television, with its great power to illuminate every concept and furnish an insight into every life-style, has obsolesced the actor as mouthpiece of idea and personifier of life-style. The future of the actor, he believes, lies in "leading the members of the audience so

that they can open up and be actors, too, can return to what they felt and thought as children and bring it out.

In "Super Fly," Lee portrays a cocaine and marijuana dealer who succumbs to the blandishments of illicit success in the harsh world of the ghetto. He will also be seen in an independently made film, "Fall Line," which is awaiting release.

SHEILA FRAZIER (*Georgia*)

The classic Hollywood fable used to tell of the beautiful waitress who is discovered by a director and becomes a screen star overnight. Something like that happened to Sheila Frazier—only the place was Harlem. She was a secretary, and it was she who brought herself to the attention of the director. Sheila did wind up starred in a new motion picture, "Super Fly," a Sig Shore Production for Warner Bros., directed by Gordon Parks Jr., and she is beautiful.

Even in childhood, Sheila wanted to be an actress. She never thought she would be. She was markedly skinny, painfully shy, had a formidable stutter. Her mother worked for a cosmetics firm, her father managed a factory. The best solution for young Sheila seemed to be the business world. She enrolled in commercial courses at high school in Englewood, N.J., and upon graduation

went into secretarial jobs. With another stake saved, she went to the Negro Ensemble Company for workshop study under Gil Moses. Presently, she moved on to the New Federal Theatre in the East Village for further study with Dick Williams.

In the summer of 1971, she met Richard Roundtree socially. The star of "Shaft" befriended her and referred her to his own manager, Bill Cherry, who took her on as a client. Through the actors' grapevine in Harlem, Roundtree heard of an impending film about the black ghetto called "Super Fly," and Sheila also learned about it. Roundtree encouraged her to attend a casting call and spoke to the director of the film, Gordon Parks Jr. When she appeared at the call, virtually every aspiring young actress in the black world was there. Miss Frazier walked up to Parks, suggested he dismiss the other girls because the part had been cast. Parks laughed, gave her a script, asked her to return for a reading with Ron O'Neal, the major star of "Super Fly." Some time later she was awarded the part.

It is that of a girl in love with a cocaine dealer named Priest, an exciting, rich and flamboyant man with many women around him. When he needs genuine love and surcease from the frightening hazards of his occupation, he turns to her.

The role was a tough one to bring off, especially for its climatic love scene where the girl and the dealer bathe together. Aside from the problems of appearing nude and doing this single scene for five hours until it was right, there were the inner flurries of a young woman of 23 who used to be very shy and even stuttered. Miss Frazier conquered herself, the part and the moment.

She attributes her ability to do so to the studies in metaphysics and the practice of meditation she commenced about a year ago. She reads metaphysical works daily and engages in meditation and prayer. There was also a period of volunteer work for her at Reality House in Harlem, a place where drug addicts seek help. Her interest in Reality House began with a journey she undertook, walking all the way because there wasn't enough money to pay bus fare. She accompanied a man with whom she was involved, and to maintain their relationship she insisted that he undergo treatment. At Reality House, the man discovered he had a talent for commercial art and is today a very successful designer. They no longer see each other, but Miss Frazier revels in the achievements of the man. She stayed on at the Reality House to work with others. From this, too, she drew elements of personal strength

to overcome her own stuttering handicap, her own shyness, her own faulty image of herself as an awkward and unattractive girl. She drew on many self-discoveries and insights for the characterization of the girl in "Super Fly." And it all worked for her. Director Parks intends to cast her in another picture because of what she showed in the first.

JULIUS W. HARRIS (*Scatter*)

Very few walk into an acting career on a dare, but Julius W. Harris did and he's been at it ever since, now has a starring role in "Super Fly," the Sig Shore Production for Warner Bros., directed by Gordon Parks Jr.

Harris was a sometime-drummer who hung around Greenwich Village with a group of black artists, writers, actors and directors which included Al Freeman, Yaphet Koto, Leonard Parker and, especially, Charles Gordone. The latter is looked upon as something of a legendary figure among black people in the arts for his talents as a writer-actor-director. Harris and Gordone had been friends for years and, at the moment, Gordone was casting director for a movie, "Nothing But a Man." Harris knew what the story was and knew about a particular character in it, decidedly a heavy. He is a big man of strong

opinions and a rolling, emphatic voice. He informed Gordone that "you guys" didn't know how to bring such a character to life. In front of several cronies, Gordone challenged Harris to apply for the part. Unable to back down, Harris did—by reading for the director. He won the role, and on the first day of rehearsal had to get himself drunk to endure the strain. He was lucky, though. In the cast were such experienced thespians as Gloria Foster and Ivan Dixon. They took him in hand, helped him with his lines and his acting. When the picture appeared, Harris received featured billing.

Though "Nothing But a Man" did very well at the boxoffice, won several awards and is still shown in various places, Harris had to wait two years for his next film role. He filled in the time by doing bits, eventually won good parts in "Husbands," "The Lost Man," "Incident," and "You're a Big Boy Now." Currently he is not only starred in "Super Fly," but co-starred in "Shaft's Big Score" for MGM and "Trouble Man" for 20th Century-Fox.

He played his first stage role in "The Amen Corner," where he was again lucky. The cast included Claudia McNeil, Georgia Burke, Dick Ward, Helen Martin and Minnie Gentry, every

one a seasoned player and each glad to teach the neophyte.

He joined the Negro Ensemble Company, appeared in their production of "God Is a Guess What" and "Sty of the Blind Pig" and had a major role in "No Place to Be Somebody" which won a Pulitzer Prize. He has also dipped into television with appearances in "The Hawk," "N.Y.P.D." and an ABC Movie of the Week, "Incident in San Francisco."

Harris' talents as an actor may derive indirectly from his parents. His mother worked as a dancer at the legendary Cotton Club, his father played trumpet in the once-famous Noble Sissle jazz orchestra. He had no conscious ambition for show business, however, and as a kid in a black ghetto of Philadelphia, where he was born, got into the usual scrapes with the usual gang. At 18, during World War II, he enlisted in the Army rather than go to jail for one of these scrapes. In the service, he learned to play the drums and developed skills as a hospital orderly and nurse. After another enlistment, because jobs were scarce outside, he went to work in a Philadelphia hospital, then moved to New York and another hospital job. He found an apartment in The Village and there met Gordone.

Harris feels very comfortable with the movie

camera and enjoys playing the heavies for which his build, voice and face qualify him. When he prepares for a part he instinctively uses elements of The Method, which he never studied. He does not try to learn the lines in a script first, but finds some actual person who resembles the character he is to play and studies that person.

In "Super Fly," he portrays Scatter, a cocaine dealer who has retired from the racket to run a restaurant. His best protege in the arts of dealing asks him to obtain a big supply of cocaine so that the younger man can make a final "score" and get out. The request puts Scatter into a double quandary: about his own safety should he try, and about the morality of helping a younger man to escape to a better life. He does try, and for that is killed by higher ups.

GORDON PARKS JR. (*Director*)

"I love movies, I've spent hours at movies, our generation is all movies," says Gordon Parks Jr. "I've lived with film all my life."

Parks is the 37-year-old director of "Super Fly," a potent drama about life in the black ghetto, produced by Sig Shore for Warner Bros. release. Film, of both the still and the moving varieties, has been a fact of his existence from childhood on. His father is Gordon Parks Sr., a black man counted one of the world's great photographers, now a motion picture director. It was only natural, nearly inevitable, that young Parks took the same course. He has caught up with his father by directing his own first movie. The difference is that Parks, Sr. had to wait years for a chance to make a feature-length motion picture, right into the mid-Sixties when he directed "The Learning Tree." Time has telescoped and movies

are indeed the medium of the creative young. Parks, Jr. already has a big one behind him. And is already planning on four more films.

Originally, young Parks had a penchant for painting and followed it but found he preferred the immediacy of the lens and became convinced the camera is more veritably the medium of today. He thinks, even now, that the modern world has a place for the painter and painting, but neither are for him.

He went to school in Paris, where he tried his hand at directing student plays. Then he served in the U. S. Army, later began to work with his father at still picture-taking and assisted on several short motion pictures by which Parks, Sr., taught himself the intricacies of movie-making. As the father learned, so did the son.

NBC gave young Parks a chance to make a documentary in concert with Joseph Rivers, son of Larry Rivers, the American painter; and Pierre Gesseau, the French director of "The Sky Above, the Mud Below." The trio ranged through Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanganyika and other parts of the African continent and emerged with a successful film called "Africa and I."

An assignment from United Artists to do special photography of Marlon Brando in a film called "Burn" was an opportunity for Parks to

study the directing methods of Gilo Pontecarvo and to ask lots of questions. A similar opportunity came with an assignment from Paramount to again photograph Brando in "The Godfather." This time Parks could study the methods of director Francis Ford Coppola. And ask lots of questions.

Between times, he worked with his father on the making of "The Learning Tree" and with the late Herbert Biberman on "Slaves." Each director encountered had something Parks could store and synthesize for the time when he would direct a film, too.

A couple of years ago he began to talk and plan that film with a good friend named Phillip Fenty, a very bright young man who had tossed aside a going career in advertising in favor of a move toward motion pictures. They wrote this and they wrote that, they talked and they analyzed. Finally, Fenty evolved the core idea of what is now "Super Fly." They began to develop it in depth with another friend, Ron O'Neal, who now heads the "Super Fly" cast. From the beginning it was understood that Fenty would write, O'Neal star and Parks direct. They found their way to a producer, Sig Shore, and what had for long been a delicious fantasy assumed the girth of reality.

Every scene of "Super Fly" was shot in actual locations in New York. Every location was analyzed beforehand for camera angles, some were used for scenes that had been charted out in advance, others for scenes that were allowed to go into improvisation. Parks, as director, had to make decisions from moment to moment even as he was learning the awesome difference between what had been projected and what was happening. He is candid to admit he was scared but says the fear in actuality derived from respect for the mysterious, illuminating process of bringing a film into being. He has weathered it now, and is chafing to get to the next one.

SIG SHORE (*Producer*)

In the days when Sig Shore was a youngster on Harlem's 103rd Street, the area was a ghetto for the foreign-born and their children. The problems of housing, food, jobs, schooling—survival itself—were enormous.

Now the area is a ghetto for American-born blacks and their children. The problems have not changed or gone away, merely intensified and multiplied. Sig Shore still carries in him the old sensitivities, the swift awareness from the years of his youth. And that, perhaps, is why he registered well and strongly with a group of young blacks who came in search of a producer to make their idea for a movie about the Harlem of now into an actual motion picture. They took him on, and he took them on. The result is "Super Fly," a nettlesome melodrama with a story torn straight from brutal streets, where the

brightest, the best endowed, the most life-loving can only twist and scheme to "score" and, maybe, get away.

"Super Fly" is Sig Shore's own first feature-length production for the big screen, though by no means his introduction to the film medium. He entered the world of movies in 1946. A man he met in Palm Springs, where Shore was recuperating from a long run as a plane navigator in World War II, got him a job in the publicity department at Warner Bros. He learned enough in two years to form his own ad agency on the West Coast, then plunged into producing for the new communications medium, television. His first venture was "The Errol Flynn Theatre." Then he was engaged by David O. Selznick to distribute a group of Selznick films to video outlets. Theatrical distribution beckoned and Shore followed. He bought, imported and distributed in theatres, and later on TV, such notable motion pictures as "Hiroshima, Mon Amour," and "The 400 Blows."

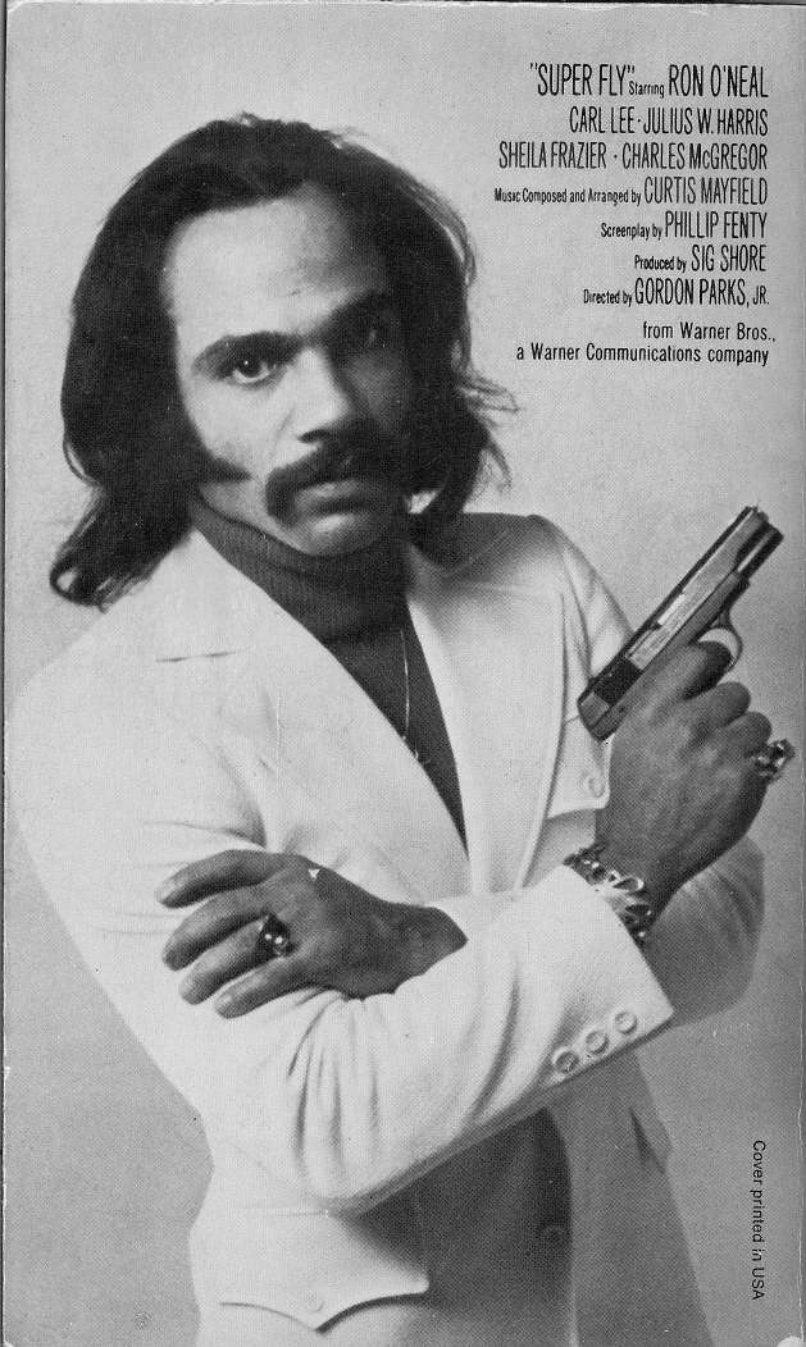
In the mid-Fifties, Shore became involved in the cultural exchange program of the U. S. State Department and wound up importing and distributing Soviet films, including "My Name Is Ivan" and "The Sword and the Dragon." He returned to television production, turning out

some 250 shows, then took over and ran Ivan Tors Films for which he produced the "Flipper," "Daktari" and "Gentle Ben" series among others. In 1970, Shore formed Plaza Pictures and went back to theatrical distribution with "Pigeons," "Dead of Summer," "Detective Belli," "Battle of El Alemain" and "Black Jesus." The last launched him into the black market, an increasingly-important part of the current audience for motion pictures.

Phillip Fenty, a talented black advertising man who had determined to enter motion pictures, looked up Shore at the suggestion of a mutual friend. He talked out the basic idea of "Super Fly," and at the same time cased Shore. Liking what he saw, Fenty returned with Ron O'Neal, a brilliant young black actor, and Gordon Parks Jr., gifted son of a great black photographer, Gordon Parks Sr., who wanted to turn film director as his father had. They trusted Shore, and a deal was made. In January, 1972, "Super Fly" quietly started shooting, completely with funds from black sources which ranged from dentist to pushers, from madams to businessmen. A few months later, Warner Bros., where Sig Shore began his film career, acquired "Super Fly" for release.

Shore is already planning to start a new picture, and has promised Warners to make another

for that company. Success has come to the boy from 103rd Street, but when he talks about "Super Fly" the old memories of what it was like come back feelingly.


"SUPER FLY" Starring RON O'NEAL
CARL LEE · JULIUS W. HARRIS
SHEILA FRAZIER · CHARLES McGREGOR
Music Composed and Arranged by CURTIS MAYFIELD
Screenplay by PHILLIP FENTY
Produced by SIG SHORE
Directed by GORDON PARKS, JR.
from Warner Bros.,
a Warner Communications company
Cover printed in USA